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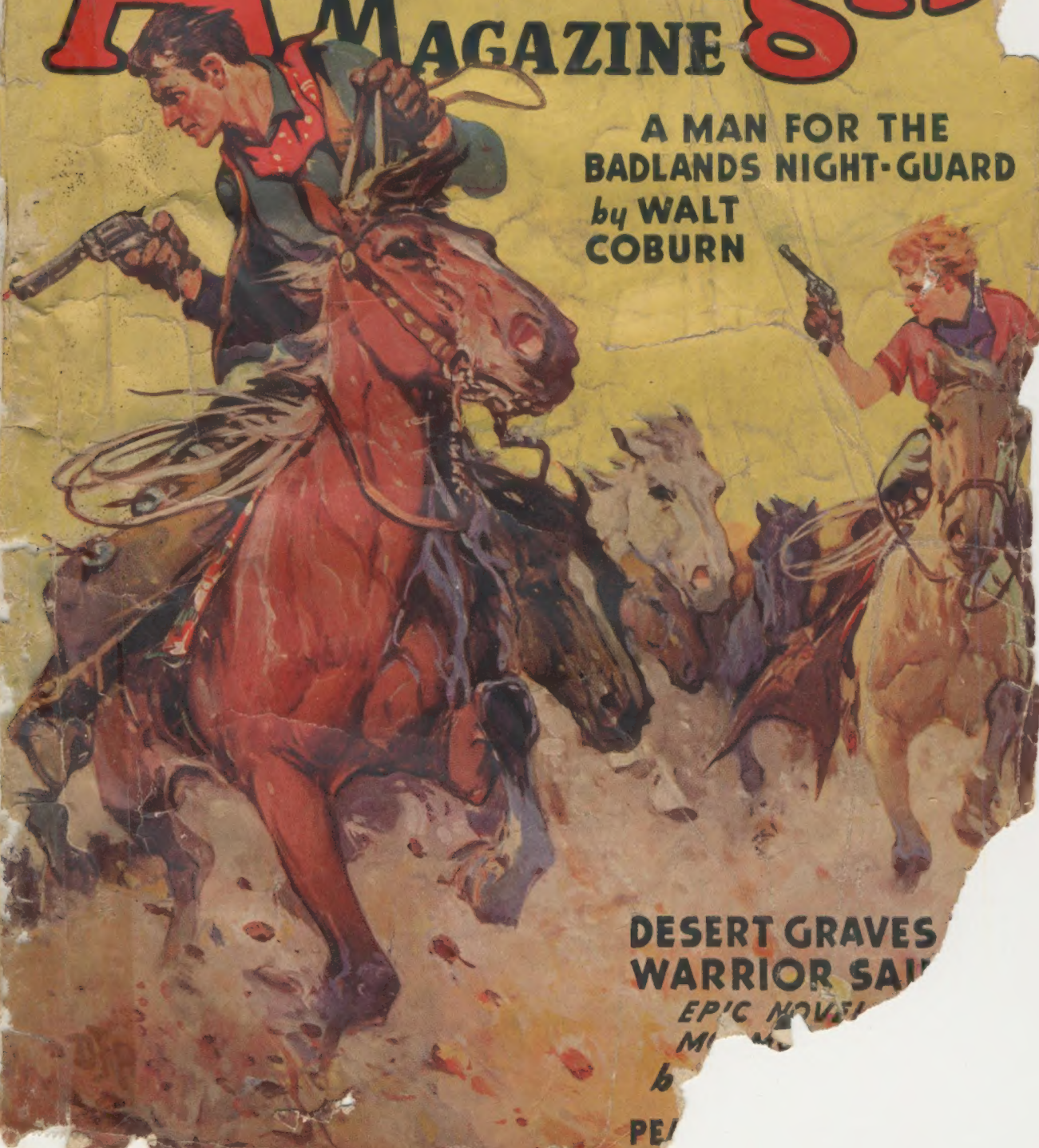


JANUARY

Ace-High

MAGAZINE

A MAN FOR THE
BADLANDS NIGHT-GUARD
by WALT
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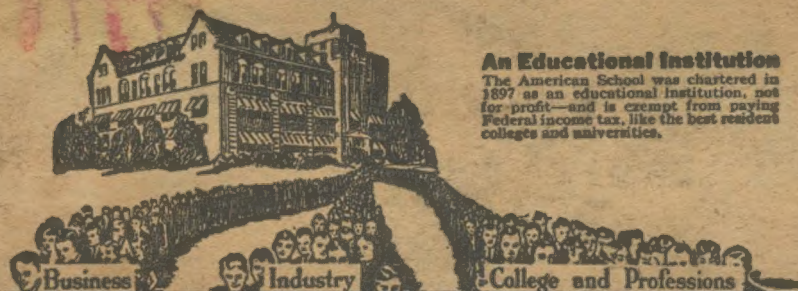
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Vol. LXXXI, No. 3

CONTENTS

January, 1938

Complete Western Novel

- DESERT GRAVES FOR WARRIOR SAINTS**.....Cliff Farrell 8
Only Joel Tarbell, buckskin spy, could hope to stay the blood-red hand of civil war when Mormons faced the Army fighting men.

Two Ace-High Novelettes

- A MAN FOR THE BADLANDS NIGHT GUARD**.....Walt Coburn 54
Scott Morgan rode to Fort Musselshell—a Badlands prodigal, returned to find his father's corpse swinging from a lawman's hangrope. . . . Where another empty noose had long awaited his grim homecoming!
BIVOUAC OF PRAIRIE DOOM.....Col. George Brydges Rodney 86
Corporal Keller, under arrest, sought bitter disgrace and unhonored death—to teach a headstrong shavetail lieutenant the last lesson in frontier fighting courage!

Five Ace-High Short Stories

- SATAN SWEARS A BADGE-TOTER**.....James P. Olsen 34
It was up to Inkspot Smith to prove that a coward may sometimes be a cowtown hero!
THE GUNMAN WHO DIED TWICE.....John G. Pearsol 43
Doc Price staked two men's lives that his secret remedy could reform a thieving killer!
THE BOOTHILL VOLUNTEER.....Roland Lynch 73
"No one rides out of the Wild Bunch alive!" was their leader's grim dictum. But Dale Carson had to answer a girl's last desperate call for help. . . .
GUN-DOCTOR'S DEATH CURE.....Norman Fox 79
Bandit bullets drove Doc Guthrie back to his dark past—to salvage one life from his own counterfeit career!
TRAITOR'S PARTNER.....Stanley G. Allen 102
Dave Moncreath collected strange payment for his years of prison purgatory!

Departments and Features

- HISTORY IN THE MAKING**.....The Editors 4
When men of the old Frontier made their mark in History!
HANG-NOOSE HERO.....Old-Timer 6
The blood of Slim Summers' dead partner branded Slim with the dread murder-mark!
OUT-TRAIL CARAVAN.....A Department 105

ALL STORIES NEW



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History in the Making

WE NEVER did care a lot about
going to school, nor did we think
such a lot of the stuff they tried
to teach—arithmetic, spelling, geography,
and the rest. But there was one subject
which, we felt, if handled properly, held
possibilities for excitement. That was his-
tory. Without having to memorize a lot of
dates and hard-to-remember names, we
did like reading about battles, where a few
badly-trained gents with muzzle-loading
guns had to pit their courage and raw
fighting spirit against some of the best
soldiers training and equipment could
produce.

We were thinking of that phase of his-
tory when we glanced through this pres-
ent issue of *Ace-High*. For here is history
—the way we used to think it should be
presented. Here is dynamic, personalized
drama—set against a background that
played a significant and powerful part in
the development of a great nation. We
don't remember learning a great deal in
school about the Mormon troubles in early
Utah, for example—but we certainly will
remember Joel Tarbell's dramatic adven-
ture and in those glamorous days of color-
ful two-fisted action. If we recall there
wasn't much attention paid in the class-
room to the roaring boom towns along the
frontier, but they—and the people who
had to work out their own thrilling des-
tinies in them—contributed their share to
bringing civilization to the wilderness.

For all we knew, in school, Montana
was just a Western state where there were
a lot of copper mines. But to anyone who
has ever read many of Walt Coburn's
yarns it becomes a land of red-blooded
action in both mining boom camps and the
wind-swept cattle ranges. So it goes; each
story brings out some important phase of
the frontier development of our own
West, with all its glamor, high adventure,
and the determined men and women who
fought their great fight against bitter odds.

—THE EDITORS.

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HANGNOOSE HERO

WHEN the Wagon Springs-Bisbee stage rolled up before the Lincoln House, Ed Bartley, the driver was swaying on the box, his white face in sharp contrast to the rough, bloodstained bandage about his head. The shotgun messenger was slumped over on the seat, dead from a bandit's bullet in his chest.

Half a dozen men helped young Bartley down, then carried the scatter-gun man into the rear of the hardware store. With characteristic terseness Bartley said, "They got the ten thousand all right, at Lost Cabin Hill. Looked like it might be Black Whipple's bunch. I got to have another shotgun guard pronto."

Because young Ed Bartley owned the stage, and because—barring that one stick up—he had tooled the Concord on the Wagon Springs run without mishap, folks figured that he had a right to pick out his own gun-guard. But they kicked like a bunch of bogged down dogies when Ed turned up with Ron Summers.

Summers had come to the Bisbee range a couple of years back and instantly incurred the suspicion and dislike of everyone. He kept entirely to himself in his little cabin out on the South Fork; which, some men claimed was the scene of mysterious hard-riding midnight visitors. Furthermore, it was an established fact, which Summers defiantly admitted, that he had served time in Deer Lodge for a train stick-up. Yet, he had managed to stay out of jail since his arrival in Bisbee. No one knew what young Ed Bartley had said to Summers when he offered that lanky, taciturn rancher the job of riding gun-guard. But the townsmen said plenty.

Ed heard them out, as he sat upon the box, with Slim Summers beside him. Then he looked coldly down at the banker, the foremost objector to Summers.

"Mister Burgess, if you want to trust the bank's gold to me an' Slim here, all right. If not, you can tote it down to Wagon Springs yourself. Because a man's made a mistake once, like Slim has, he won't make it again. I'm givin' him a chance to show what he's got—in nerve an' honesty. Any more complaints?" There were none.

Slim Summers didn't say anything to Ed about it that trip, but later, it seemed as if his back was a little straighter, his head held a little higher and he completely lost his customary hand-dog look. They made a strange team, young Ed, whose honesty was above question, and the gent who'd served time in Deer Lodge for helping stick up the Central Pacific Flyer some eight years back. The gold went through all right, but there was an undercurrent of uneasiness, of whispers and muttering a man couldn't just put his hand on.

It happened just about six months after Slim Summers started guarding the stage.

A steady drizzle had been seeping down all day from a lowering sky and there was no sign of the stage carrying \$15,000 in dust from the mines, headed for the Bisbee bank. When nine o'clock came, and ten, and eleven, without the long-expected Concord, a few men who hung out before the Lincoln House winked smugly and said, "I told you so." But the banker, old Burgess, just looked sick, and he kept on looking sicker every minute he looked down the road. At noon he hustled to the sheriff's office, and Sheriff Grindley started rounding up the men.

At dusk they came back with a dead man slung across a saddle. The banker fell back limply, when he saw it was Ed Bartley. That night the sheriff went down to the printer, and ordered two hundred reward dodgers printed. The bank would pay a thousand dollars for Summers—dead or alive.

And then the strangest of all news came out, that set tongues to wagging, that made men shake their heads in wonder. It was just this—that

if Slim Summers had robbed the stage of the \$15,000 in dust, he also had robbed the town of the stage itself!

"Why the hell he'd want to do a thing like that for, beats me!" the sheriff swore. "Here we come on the body of Ed Bartley, shot plumb through the back, lyin' at the foot of Twenty-Mile Draw. But there ain't a sign of the stage, of Slim—or of the gold! Slim may be smart enough to kill Ed an' take the dust—but by gosh, he can't git far nor fast with that ol' mud-wagon!"

At Ed Bartley's funeral, folks forgot that his sharp tongue and salty ways used to make them pretty mad. They forgot everything except he was a damn good man, and a good neighbor. The men stood around that unfilled grave, cooking up a hang-party, if and when they caught Slim Summers.

"The back-shootin', slinky son!" cursed the hardware man. "We'll ketch him some day—he can't get far enough away, and when we do—"

They did catch Slim Summers, but sooner than they expected—and in an entirely different way than they had counted on.

It was just about siesta time when the loungers in the Lincoln House Bar suddenly looked up and cocked their heads, the better to hear. Then with one accord they rushed for the door. There was no doubt about it—the mysteriously missing stage was returning. They could hear it; they could see it just coming up the Lost Cabin Grade; a speck which grew larger as the horses heaved and tugged at the careening vehicle.

"Is—is—who the hell's that on the box, anyhow?" gasped a man.

But there was no need of answer, for everyone there recognized the shadow-thin form of Slim Summers on the box.

"Git a rope!" yelled a man. And in a moment there was more excitement in Bisbee than there had been since gold was found in Wagon Springs. For gold—a thousand dollars worth—was there, waiting for the first man who could line his sights on Slim!

It was a noisy, cursing throng that roared out—some on horseback, some on foot—to meet the stage. An ugly crowd, too, for they had a debt to settle—unless Slim was a better and faster talker than had ever lived. . . . Soon Slim, his bullet-shattered gun-arm dangling at his side, was lifted bodily off the box, manhandled, and dragged into the center of town. There, a rope was slung over a stout cottonwood limb and the noose fitted about his neck, while the sheriff was locked inside his own jailhouse.

"If you know any prayers, say 'em fast!" said the leader of the hang-party to the man who stood there, bruised and beaten.

"Nary a prayer!" snapped Slim, "but one dyin' request. Look inside that locked stage an' you'll find Black Whipple an' his bunch—or what's left of 'em after I tracked 'em down. You'll find the gold that they took back in the boot. An' now—"

But already men were running toward the stage, and in a moment a great shout went up. "By God, it's true! Here's Black Whipple. . . . An' here's the gold!"

The mob leader took the noose from Slim's neck while the bandits were being herded toward the jail.

"Thanks, gulped Slim. "When Whipple stuck up the stage, an' shot Ed in the back, I knew there wouldn't be no use for me to drive back to town—with you-all hatin' me like you do, an' waitin' to hang somethin' on me. So I hid the stage up a few miles in a cut-off I'd found, an' tracked down the back-shootin' sons that killed the finest white man in this county. It took me five days to do it—but I got 'em. All I hope is that Ed is settin' up somewhere; lookin' down an' laughin'. I shore hope he knows I brought 'em all back—an' I reckon you'll have your hang-party, after all, boys—only you'll need more ropes!"

And Slim Summers, hangnoose hero, was right!

—OLD-TIMER.

DESERT GRAVES FOR WARRIOR SAINTS!

A taut voice gave an order. The line of riflemen jerked their guns to the "Ready . . . aim!"



An army of three thousand United States infantrymen was marching West into Utah. Every able-bodied man in the Mormon's desert empire stood ready to die in defense of the capital city. . . . Only Joel Tarbell, buckskin spy, could hope to stay the bloody hand of civil war. And a woman's scream called him back—for the firing squad's hour of doom!

THE column of mounted United States Army dragoons had advanced thirty miles west of Fort Bridger that day. As the weary troopers

pitched camp in the deepening dusk, they cursed the mud and solitude—and particularly did they curse Brigham Young and his Mormons. It was his defiance of

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**By CLIFF
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(Author of "Gun-Brother of the Doomed," etc.)



federal authority that had routed them out of comfortable billets in the States and started them on this interminable campaign that had included a freezing winter in makeshift quarters on the Continental Divide.

Leathery soldiers, wolfing their evening meal, stared with hopeful interest when a mud-spattered despatch rider was

challenged by the sentries and passed through the lines into camp. A buzz of speculation arose as the commanding officer appeared from his wagon-sheet wind-break and received the message.

The rumor ran through the camp that the despatch was from the commander-in-chief, General Albert Sidney Johnson, whose force of three thousand infantry-

men was advancing a day's march behind the dragoons. Very likely, most of the men in the ranks agreed, it was an order recalling the army back to the settlements.

But their optimism was not reflected on the weathered face of the commanding officer, who set scowling at the despatch spread on a flat rock between his booted legs. Colonel Brimstone Bob Sanderson, a blocky-bodied black-whiskered officer of the old school had won his spurs in Mexico and in bloody Indian campaigns on the plains. He was as dusty and saddle-hardened as any of his troopers. He chewed the stub of a black cigar. His tunic was open. Sun and rain and weather had faded and tarnished the gold eagles on his shoulder straps.

He beckoned his orderly. "My compliments to Lieutenant Tarbell an' Lieutenant Rawson," he growled. "Request them to report immediately."

He flicked a gruff glance at the two first lieutenants as they presented themselves. One of the young officers was tall and slim as a rapier, with straight, thin features and haughty, coal-black eyes. That was Lieutenant Mort Rawson, handsome, polished in his manners, ambitious for promotion. He came from a military ancestry, prided himself as a strict disciplinarian. His troop always delighted the eyes of an inspecting officer on the parade grounds.

The second officer, Joel Tarbell, who had been commissioned because of his services as a volunteer civilian scout in a campaign against the Cheyennes, stood slightly in the background. He was of medium height and broad-shouldered, and his dark tan was striking even in a world of weathered, sun-burned men. Clean-shaven, with blunt chin and up-turned Celtic nose and humorous gray-green eyes, he stood straight as an arrow, but escaped the ramrod exaggeration of Rawson's pose.

The colonel enviously noticed that

Lieutenant Tarbell was defying regulations by wearing comfortable Sioux moccasins in place of heavy cavalry boots. The colonel's own feet were swollen and aching inside his boots. He made a mental note to instruct his striker to steal the moccasins from the lieutenant's kit bag at the first opportunity.

He beckoned Rawson and Tarbell down beside him, and spoke in a confidential tone. "I have a despatch from General Johnston ordering me to assign two officers to a special and hazardous mission. It is feared that the Mormons plan armed resistance. Disturbing reports have come to headquarters in regard to conditions at Salt Lake City. It was hoped that Brigham Young would accede peacefully, but now there is every reason to believe that he intends to fight."

"The Mormons are fools," Mort Rawson sniffed.

Joel Tarbell shrugged. "When men spend ten years slaving to tame a desert, you can believe that they will fight for what they have accomplished," he observed.

The colonel frowned. "Their motives are not the concern of the Army. We have orders to see that the new Governor of Utah Territory is established in office, and that the Mormons acknowledge his authority. General Johnson aims to do this quickly and with a minimum of bloodshed. Accordingly, he is anxious to gain a definite idea of Mormon military strength and their plan of warfare."

HE PAUSED, glancing keenly at Joel Tarbell. "The Mormons have dropped a veil of secrecy over their preparations. Gentiles are not allowed to leave Salt Lake City. It is rumored that Brigham Young is arming a formidable body of militia to oppose invasion of Utah. We must know the truth, in order to be prepared. It happens that Tarbell is familiar with the Mormon country. He has

been over the entire trail to California several times, and he trapped and hunted in the Salt Lake Valley before accepting a commission in the Army. It is General Johnston's personal request that Tarbell be asked to undertake this detail, along with the aid of a second competent officer."

Joel Tarbell rose from his heel squat. "You mean we're to act as—spies?" he asked slowly.

"Yes," the colonel admitted. "You can't go in uniform, naturally. I would suggest that you pose as trappers. You can fill that role easily enough, Tarbell, having been a trapper in the past. And I'm sure Rawson is clever enough to carry out the part well enough to delude the Mormons."

Mort Rawson was frowning. "I presume that I will be the responsible officer," he said, "as I am of senior service."

The colonel gave him a curt glance. "Your commission ranks Tarbell's by a few months, Lieutenant," he conceded. "That does give you precedence. However, in this instance, because of Tarbell's knowledge of the country, I think it advisable to entrust him with the responsibility."

Joel had been standing moodily. "Just a moment, Colonel," he said reluctantly. "I prefer to remain with the command as a uniformed officer. I don't care to be a skulking spy."

Brimstone Bob displayed more outward amazement than he really felt. He had expected something like that from this blunt-spoken subaltern. He spread his hands in a gesture of acceptance.

"Can't say I blame you, Lieutenant," he observed blandly. "I forgot to mention that the Mormons have sent word that they will hang every spy caught in Utah. It's a risky job, without much glory. Naturally we won't order a man to attempt a task of this dangerous nature."

And he shrewdly watched the hurt and resentment that entered Joel Tarbell's square features.

Mort Rawson turned and saluted the colonel briskly. "You can count on me, sir," he said. "I wish to thank the colonel for giving me this opportunity to be of service."

The colonel nodded. "I regret that Tarbell finds it inexpedient to go. His knowledge of the country would make the mission less hazardous. Accurate information probably will prevent needless bloodshed and save many lives. It might even end this war without recourse to gunpowder."

Joel looked grimly at the colonel, then shrugged. "You win, Colonel," he acknowledged wryly. "You knew damned well that you'd whipsaw me into line with that kind of talk. I'll withdraw my refusal."

Brimstone Bob Sanderson grinned, unashamed, and shook hands with Joel. "There's a captain's commission waiting for each of you if you succeed, gentlemen," he assured them, and set out a flask of brandy that he had treasured over a hard trail. "It's not a job that a soldier prefers, I admit, but spying is a necessary part of this business of war. Drink up. Here are my instructions. . . ."

He produced maps, and they bent their heads in conference. At its conclusion the colonel nodded dismissal.

"Better start at once, gentlemen." And he winked at Joel. "Watch yourself in Salt Lake City, Lieutenant. I've been told that there were quite a few bruised hearts among the ladies at Leavenworth when a certain pug-nosed officer rode away with his troop. And I've also heard that Mormon girls are pretty. Remember that war and love-making never mix."

THE two young officers saluted and stepped out into the starlight. Tired troopers were turning in. The cookfires

were being drowned out at the orders of the officer of the day.

"The colonel's warning about the ladies was not entirely in jest, Tarbell," Rawson advised stiffly. "We are entrusted with a grave responsibility. I trust that any past differences between us will be forgotten in view of the nature of this mission."

"Forgotten and forgiven," Joel grinned, "provided you refer to that sloe-eyed little dancer with the pretty pouting smile that I stole away from you at the *baile* the colonel gave on his birthday. She eloped with a Santa Fé trader the next day, anyway, so we both lost out."

"Bah!" Rawson snapped. "Your flirtations don't interest me. I want you to understand that our lives will be at stake on this venture. Any indiscretion on your part might be disastrous. This is serious business."

"Damned serious," Joel agreed, and his grin was gone. "We're going to lie and cheat and scheme against people who've waded through blood and hell; who've starved and sweated and fought for the things they believe in. They've conquered a desert. And we're assigned to help try to take it away from them."

"You talk like a psalm-singing Saint, Tarbell. These Mormons are in open rebellion, bent on setting up an empire of their own and annexing California. They deserve no—"

A hoarse challenge rang out from a sentry. Rising fast on that alarm, came the drum of approaching hoofs. An army carbine exploded, and that touched off a ragged valley all along the sentry line, accompanied by wild yells.

"A raid!" Joel shouted, already on his way through the aroused camp. "Turn out! Turn out! They're stampeding the horses. Attention, D Troop! Take to the left, through the trees, and try to flank 'em. Attention C Troop, this way! Follow me!"

The sentries were still shooting. There

came a confused uproar from where the horses were picketed, south of camp. Guns painted red smears in the night; men were shouting shrilly. The rumble of hoofs increased, and Joel saw cavalry horses stampeding wildly.

"Indians!" a soldier bawled frantically.

"Not Indians—white men!" Joel yelled, leading a squad of men toward the turmoil, with a Navy revolver in his fist. "They're Mormons!"

In the powder flashes he had glimpsed riders with bronzed faces under round, flat-topped hats.

THE demoralized sentries and stock guards were bewildered by the stampeding horses. Dust swirled up, dulling the flash of guns. A wounded horse screamed like a frightened human. A terrified animal came plunging out of the darkness into Joel, sending him staggering. It whirled, letting drive with shod hoofs that grazed Joel's head.

Then the herd instinct took command. The released cavalry horses thundered away from camp into the darkness of the sage plain. And with them went the Mormon raiders who had staged this bold sortie.

Colonel Sanderson was on the scene now, and living up to his sobriquet. Brimstone Bob was swearing in the free, sulphureous style of the Army mule skinner.

"What in the blisterin' tophet happened, Lieutenant?" he bellowed, encountering Joel.

"A bunch of men swooped through the lines and stampeded the mounts, sir. They were Mormons, by their garb. I caught a glimpse of one or two. There weren't many of them."

"Mormons? Impossible! They wouldn't be this far east."

"They may be sending patrols to harry the advance," Joel pointed out. "And to spy on us as well. Both sides can

play at the spying game, you know."

A dozen or more horses had been caught by soldiers. With the colonel snapping blistering orders, pursuit was organized.

Joel, without asking permission, yanked a sergeant off one of the animals and loped away with the detail. He soon discovered that Mort Rawson was along also, riding at the colonel's side.

Joel and two civilian scouts puzzled out the trail by the light of grass torches. It was slow work in the darkness.

Here and there they came across animals that had escaped the bunch and stopped to graze. Soon the colonel had thirty mounted men at his disposal.

It was an all-night trail. When dawn came, tired men on tired horses found themselves more than thirty miles from camp, south of an arm of timbered, wrinkled hills that they had partially circled in the darkness.

And it was discovered then that the missing animals had been broken up in small bunches and scattered over the plain. It would take considerable time to get them together.

Colonel Sanderson reorganized the search, splitting his men into groups with orders to round up what animals could be found.

"And if you pick up the trail of these Mormons," he growled, "send word to me at once. Lieutenant Tarbell believes there were no more than five or six of the rascals. They will receive the treatment accorded guerillas in warfare—bullets or the noose."

He then called Joel and Rawson aside. "Your other mission is far more important than rounding up horses," he said. "I regret that you must hit the trail without proper rest, but it is imperative that you start at once. Return to camp, requisition such animals and supplies as you need, and be on your way. . . . And good luck to you both."

CHAPTER TWO

Enemy Trail Mates

JOEL and Rawson rode away together, striking a direct line northward toward the dragoon camp. Mounting through the low, wrinkled hills that intervened, Joel, in the lead, suddenly pulled down his horse among dense scrub cedar, voicing a low warning to Rawson. They sat silently, staring down at the stained and patched canvas top of a prairie wagon that stood in a secluded basin below.

Six Missouri mules grazed on picket near the wagon. A sunbonneted feminine figure was tending a small, smokeless cookfire. And a boy, who looked to be about fourteen, was chopping wood.

"Immigrants." Rawson shrugged and moved to kneel his horse ahead.

Joel halted him with a gesture. A man on an iron gray horse had appeared from the brush and was riding up to the wagon. He wore a linsey shirt, homespun breeches and a weathered, round-brimmed felt hat. He had a side-gun thrust in his brass-buckled, leather belt. A long-barreled rifle lay across the cantle.

Rawson uttered an angry growl. "That fellow is riding Sanderson's own mount. Why, damnit, this fellow was in on the raid."

To Judd's dismay, Rawson drove steel to his horse and leaped away down the slant toward the wagon. The sudden crash of brush caused the rider below to twist around. He whirled the rangy, powerful cavalry horse and vanished into the trees beyond. Rawson fired two shots from his Navy revolver, but the range was far too great.

Joel, cursing Rawson's precipitate action, set his horse down the treacherous slant in pursuit. Rawson, ahead, suddenly sat back in the saddle, checking his mount, with a cry of alarm. He had come

within an ace of riding over a shale ledge that dropped straight down for nearly one hundred feet.

It took them ten minutes to work their way along the flank of the basin around the ledge. When they finally rode up to the wagon, they found the boy placidly chopping wood again. The woman was only a shadowy figure inside the wagon, her bonneted head bent over her knitting.

The boy rested his ax. He stood regarding them with solemn brown eyes. Sturdily built, freckled, a pathetically resolute figure in his hand-me-down clothes, he showed no sign of fear or cringing.

Rawson dismounted, glaring around. "Where did that man go, who was riding the Army horse, boy?" he demanded.

"Couldn't say," the lad returned quietly.

"Can't say, eh? Perhaps I'll have to jog your memory a trifle. Shielding horse thieves is a mighty serious offense."

Joel frowned, stepped down from his horse. He noticed that the woman inside the wagon was watching intently. Her face was a blur in the shadows of the canvas top.

Rawson turned to Joel. "What do you make of this outfit?" he whispered. "There's only a woman and this kid here."

"The Mormons who raided us have been using this wagon as their base. They've been camping here more than a week, waiting for us to come along."

Rawson stared. "What's that! How do you know?"

Joel gestured around impatiently. "Use your eyes, man. There are men's boot tracks all over the place. And six mules couldn't graze this basin so clean. Horses have been held here for some time. The ashes around that fire show that it has cooked plenty of meals. It's my guess that this is a guerilla patrol outfit, and that the woman and boy probably were sent along to avert suspicion as they came over the trail from Utah."

"Jove! You may be right. The colonel must be notified at once to round up these Mormon horse thieves."

"By this time, the Mormons likely are ten miles away. You can be sure they won't come near this wagon until they're certain the coast is clear," Joel remarked. "Let's ride. We're only wasting time here, Rawson."

"What! And give them a chance to wriggle away! Why, this boy or that woman can lead the troop to those damned guerillas. They probably know where they are hiding."

"Like blazes we will!" the boy spoke up sturdily.

RAWSON turned on him with a foreboding scowl. "I'm an officer in the United States Army, you Mormon whelp," he said. "It would be well for you to answer my questions truthfully. What's your name and where are you from?"

"I'm Heber Delliver," the lad said scornfully. "An' I'm from Salt Lake City. We're on a huntin' trip to git buffalo robes an' jerky."

"And where are the ruffians who attacked an army encampment last night and stole government horses?"

Heber Delliver's brown, sturdy face was pale, but there was no fear in his manner. "What men?" he asked, with a brave glance toward the wagon.

Rawson caught the boy by the shirt and raised a hand to administer a slap. "I've stood enough of your defiance," he gritted. "Talk, you Mormon brat, or I'll—"

Joel blocked Rawson's arm, checking the blow. "Cool down, Rawson," he advised. "He's nothing but a boy."

Haughty antagonism flared in Rawson. An exponent of the caste system in the Army, he looked down on officers like Joel, who had been commissioned directly from civilian service.

"I'll handle this, Tarbell," he said icily.

"My commission antedates your own by two—"

"Damn your commission! It doesn't give you authority to browbeat a boy. We're not making war on kids and women. Don't be a fool, Rawson. There's nothing to be gained here. You spoiled everything when you came plunging down the hill and gave that man a chance to take to the brush and warn his pals."

"You seem mighty anxious to protect these Mormons, Tarbell," Rawson snarled. "You have my permission to withdraw. Personally, I intend to make this boy talk."

His grip tightened on the lad. "No more nonsense, now," he threatened. "Where did they go? Answer me, damn you!"

His fingers were biting into the lad's flesh, bringing a cry of pain. Joel moved then. He caught Rawson by the collar, whirled him away and sent him sprawling on his haunches.

"Keep your hands off that kid," he gritted.

Rawson came to his feet, white with rage. "Why, you damned, insufferable scum!" he choked. "I'll teach you to keep your hands off your betters!"

He came moving in on Joel, his fists up. Mort Rawson was the champion swordsman in the regiment and had a reputation as a boxer. Joel had never donned

padded mitts nor taken a lesson in ring science. He had been taught his rough-and-tumble fighting tactics in the merciless school of trapper's camps and trail-town taverns.

Rawson feinted for an opening, then flashed in, his fists darting wickedly. But his punches missed. Then Joel, without seeming to move, sent in a short right hook to the chin. Rawson reeled back and sat down again. A spurt of blood came from his face. He leaped to his feet and rushed in like a madman.

There was none of the twinkling good humor in Joel's sun-swart features now. He measured Rawson and let drive with a punch that carried crushing power. Rawson swayed back, then collapsed forward on his face.

A SWIFT regret touched Joel. He looked at the boy, Heber Delliver, who wore a wide, delighted grin.

"Fetch water, son," Joel ordered.

The lad willingly obeyed, returning from a nearby spring with a brimming oaken pail. After a minute Mort Rawson revived and came shakily to his feet. His jaw was swelling and one eye exhibited signs of closing.

"Let's ride, Rawson," Joel said briefly. "I suggest that in the future we let our private differences rest until the campaign is over."



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"I should bring charges against you, Tarbell," Rawson gritted. "The colonel is anxious to apprehend these guerrillas."

"But more anxious that we proceed on this other job. We will report the presence of this wagon when we reach camp. Here's your horse, Rawson. We're only losing time here."

Joel saw that the woman had alighted from the wagon. He glimpsed a six-shooter that she was seeking to keep concealed in the folds of her homespun dress. He had a fleeting impression that she was young. But she turned away swiftly, moving out of sight around the wagon.

Mort Rawson rode in uncompromising silence as they pushed on for the next ten miles, to the dragoon encampment. He let Joel report the affair at the wagon.

Within an hour they departed from camp again, mounted on two fresh animals that soldiers had rounded up. They carried sizable saddlerolls.

Heading south until dark, in case Mormon guerrillas might be keeping an eye on them from the hills, they camped for a brief rest. And when they resumed their journey at midnight they wore buckskin breeches, tanned hide hunting shirts and moccasins that Joel had borrowed from civilian scouts with the detachment.

Now they headed directly west, paralleling the great Overland Trail, where the ruts made by the lurching wagons of the gold-mad Forty-Niners were still sharp and distinct, and on which the dust of recent Mormon handcart migrations had barely settled. Over this trail had gone the adventurous hordes of a young, expanding nation, some in fringed buckskins, some in mufti. And now it was awakening again, this time to the flash and rattle of sabers and the tramp of uniformed hosts bent on the grim business of civil warfare.

Mort Rawson rode with his nose in the air, ill at ease in his wrinkled, shapeless buckskin garb. The fringed breeches were

ten inches too short, exposing his shanks, and the shirt had the smoky odor of an Arapahoe tepee. Joel's garb fitted him no better, but somehow there was a subtle difference. He seemed at home in buckskins and parfleche.

CHAPTER THREE

Stronghold of Strong Men

ON FOOT, Joel and Rawson walked northward through the dry white heat of a desert afternoon. The sullen mass of the mighty Wasatch range of mountains girded the metallic sky a dozen miles to their right. Far to the north, the sun glinted on an expanse of blue water—the great Salt Lake. Salt and alkali flats mirrored a shimmering reflection above the flat horizon to the west.

In the foreground, half a dozen miles ahead, rose the adobe and stone walls, the smoking chimneys and the fenced fields of the stronghold that determined Mormons had built in this great inland basin—Salt Lake City.

The two disguised officers were dusty and wore a week's growth of beard. Their moccasins were worn thin. They had first looked down on the Salt Lake Valley two days earlier, from a vantage point in the Wasatch range. There they had corralled their horses back of a brush barrier in a box ravine where there was ample grass and water. On foot, they had circled to the south and then had struck boldly up the valley.

Half a dozen mounted horsemen now appeared ahead and came racing up to challenge them. The riders were Mormons. Though they answered to a semblance of military discipline, they wore no uniforms—only the customary hide boots, homespun and butternut shirts.

Their leader, keen-eyed, bearded, lifted a hand. "Where from, strangers?" he demanded curtly. "Ye seem to have met misfortune."

"The blasted P'utes jumped us a week since, down on the Green," Joel responded testily, resting his long rifle on the ground. "Sot us afoot, they did, an' made away with a season's trap o' beaver. We air slantin' for Salt Lake, hopin' to skeer up some possibles an' head back to Santy Fé."

The Mormons eyed them suspiciously and fired questions. Joel, who had adopted the jargon of the mountain men, did the bulk of the talking, stating that they had come over the Spanish Trail from Santa Fé the previous summer.

"We-uns don't aim to stand here yarnin' all day," he complained, with a trapper's independence. "We're trappers, an' if yuh don't like it, I reckon we'll bear up. Come on, pard, let's shank it. These Saints seem too danged curious for the size o' their weskets."

The bearded Mormon leader grinned faintly and motioned his men aside. "See that ye go into the city, strangers," he warned. "Ye'll find welcome there. That I promise. But ye may not find it easy to leave."

The riders wheeled and headed back, leaving a plume of gray dust in the air.

Joel shouldered his rifle again. "We'll be watched," he predicted. "Remember, Rawson, that you're a mountain man, the wildest, fightin'est, rum-guzzlin' breed that ever walked the face of the earth. Keep that in mind—and play up to it. Forget that you were ever an officer in the United States Army. And get that ramrod out of your backbone. Smile at the gals and kiss them hearty, whether they like it or not. That'll prove you're a mountain man."

"I'll carry out my end of this," Rawson snapped. "See that you make no mistakes either, Tarbell. This is the third time we've been stopped by Mormon patrols today. The valley is alive with armed men, watching every trail."

They came to irrigated fields, green

with lush crops that offered a striking contrast to the gray-green monotony of sage and rock they had traveled in the past weeks. Joel was impressed as they walked wearily into the Mormon settlement toward sundown. Handcart migrations had trebled the size of Salt Lake City in the four years since he had passed through it as a trapper.

Gabled houses of adobe and stone, square-built and solid, were laid out in a uniform plan along wide, surveyed streets. A crystalline mountain stream babbled in the stone gutters built the length of the wide main thoroughfare.

Their progress toward the center of the settlement went unchallenged, though they glimpsed the staring faces of women at doors and windows, and noticed the way the noisy broods of children quieted and faded away into the houses ahead of them. . . . A brooding tension lay over the Mormon stronghold.

IN AN open square near the heart of the town they came upon a camp of half a hundred Gentile prairie wagons. They fell into conversation with a whiskery Missouri bull-whacker.

"Strangers in this damned place, huh?" the bull-whacker grunted. "Wal, yuh'll find it a sight easier to git in than to git out. These cussed Saints has been keepin' us here nigh onto a month. We was east-bound fer Leavenworth, out o' Placerville, but the Saints won't let us go no further, on account of trouble with the government. I hear the Army's on the way to hang Brigham Young an' put an end to this Mormon rebellion. If yo're a Gentile, you won't be allowed to leave until they say so. One of the boys tried to slip away a couple nights ago. He was shot dead by a Mormon guard."

Joel sold his rifle to the wagon man for two ounces of raw California gold dust. They made their way to a tavern, where disgruntled Gentiles and a scattering of

buckskin-clad trappers and California traders were congregated.

Talk was free and comradeship easy. Joel soon fell into a Spanish monte game, while Rawson remained at the bar, buying rum, the bulk of which he secretly spilled into the sawdust. From the conversation, they learned that Gentiles were allowed the liberty of the city, but death was the penalty for trying to pass out of it.

After two hours, when they downed a final drink and left the tavern, they had learned nothing whatever in regard to Mormon military preparations.

"This is a wild goose chase," Rawson grumbled as they headed toward a 'dobe building that offered lodging. "There's no sign of any preparation for war in this mud town."

"You're blind, Rawson," Joel denied wearily. "This place is set on a hair trigger. Except for a scattering of hawk-eyed Saints who're keeping a close eye on the Gentiles, I haven't seen an able-bodied Mormon man since we entered. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Jove!" Rawson muttered. "I believe you're right."

"The Mormons aren't showing their strength right here in Salt Lake, for they know the Army will send spies," Joel went on. "We've got to find where their militia is camped and how many men they muster."

"Easier said than done." Rawson shrugged. "From what I heard, it's suicide to try to get out of this cursed place."

Salt Lake City in darkness was a sprawling town of mystery, set in a sage-scented world under a star-clouded, blue-black bowl. A few windows and doors sent lonely bands of light striking across the sidewalks. The impression of bated life behind the blinded windows and barred doors was strong upon the two men, but the wide streets were deserted, echoing voids.

Then a hurrying figure rounded a corner abruptly and brushed against Joel in the deep shadow of a 'dobe-walled mercantile. He heard a soft, tantalizing feminine giggle.

The girl evaded Joel's sudden attempt to stay her. As she glided past, her laugh came again, softly, challengingly. Her step lagged now and she looked back. The light from a tavern window struck softly on her face. She was young and pretty, with wavy chestnut hair and big, provoking, brown eyes.

There was no mistaking the inviting way her glance lingered. Then she walked on slowly.

Joel Tarbell, lieutenant of dragoons, was no novice in the arts and wiles of the fair sex. He had won his share of favors among the belles at Leavenworth—more than his share in the opinion of brother officers.

His eyes twinkled as he spoke to Rawson. "I'll see you later at the lodging."

RAWSON caught his arm. "You fool! This is no time to go trailing after every hussy who smiles at you. That girl is a Mormon, the wife of some Mormon guerilla no doubt, hoping to have an adventure during her husband's absence."

"In that case she may be just the one to let fall some secrets that we're anxious to know," Joel pointed out. "Arrange for my lodging, Rawson, and wait for me."

"A pretty face will be the death of you some day, Tarbell."

Joel pulled away and strode after the flirtatious Mormon girl. Catching step with her, he bowed gallantly.

"You smiled at me, miss," he said. "An' I couldn't resist seein' you smile again."

Her response was low and rather tremulous. "It was bold of me, wasn't it? But Salt Lake is a lonely place. Even a Mormon girl grows lonely."

"And so does a Green River trapper," he grinned.

He took her arm. They strolled on for a moment in silence.

"I—I'm interested in trappers," she remarked shyly. "But this is hardly the place to talk. The guards forbid women to be abroad after dark. I live—live near. Perhaps you would enjoy a mug of sassafrass tea."

A pang of disappointment struck at Joel. The chances were that she was nothing more than a common woman after all. Then he glimpsed her face again at close range in a faint streak of light from a window. She had fresh, full lips that showed no sign of hard living. And she was young, no more than twenty.

Joel shrugged. "I've burned my gullet with keel-aged Jamaica an' with Missouri pop-skull likker," he grinned. "I've soaked up *aguardiente* out'n goatskin bags that was plenty high, I tell yuh now. I've even took a whirl at that hell-brew the batteaux-men drink. But ma'am, I never had the pleasure of no sassafrass tea. Lead on."

Her arm, under the heavy homespun sleeve, was slim and graceful. She walked with him another block, then turned into the deep-shadowed door of a sizable structure built of hewn stone.

He had an impression that the portal was of massive, hand-carved cedar. It opened at her touch, and she drew him in. The door closed behind him. A bar dropped with a thud.

It was dark as a cave. A realization of sudden danger struck at Joel. But before his will could formulate a plan, a buffalo robe was thrown over his head and powerful arms were locked around him. Another assailant dove at his knees, bringing him to the floor with a stunning crash.

He fought, but he was in the grip of three or four powerful men. The robe cut off his wind and snagged his arms.

Then he was lifted to his feet. The robe was snatched away. Instantly a rope

was dropped over his shoulders, pinning his arms.

Tallow tapers had been lighted in a wrought-iron candelabra. Joel blinked around; panting. He was surrounded by a dozen grim-faced men, two of whom stood at his side with guns jammed into his ribs.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death for Gentile Spies

BEYOND the group of men, Joel saw the slim, brown-eyed girl. His lips curled. She tried to return his scorn with defiance, but her glance dropped.

The room was big and low, beamed with adzed timbers. A long table, flanked by hard benches, indicated that this was a council chamber. One man sat alone at the head of the table. He was powerfully built, with a thick, graying beard and the stern eyes of a zealot. There were traces of both tolerance and an implacable will in his broad, commanding features.

Joel was prodded forward. The bearded man eyed him grimly, then asked: "What is your business in Salt Lake, sir?"

"An' by what right do yuh ask that?" Joel countered.

The bearded man gave a signal, and one of the group opened an adjoining door. Joel's lips tightened bitterly as he recognized the boy who stepped diffidently into the chamber. The newcomer was Heber Delliver, the lad whom Mort Rawson had tried to bully that day at the hidden wagon camp on the Divide. Joel's gaze swung harshly to the girl. Suddenly he comprehended that she was the sun-bonneted woman who had been with that wagon.

"Come closer, Heber," the man at the table said. "I want to ask if you have seen this man before."

Heber Delliver swallowed hard. There was a shamed look on his small-freckled

face as he glanced furtively at Joel. "Y—yes sir," he stammered. "I seen him one day when he came to our wagon back on the trail."

"How was he dressed that day?"

"He wore a soldier's uniform, with a gold bar on the shoulders. An' so did the one with him—the one that tried to slap me."

At a nod of the bearded man, the boy retreated to the wall, where the girl put an arm around him.

The speaker eyed Joel grimly. "Have you anything to say?"

"Nothing," Joel answered tersely.

The speaker gestured. "Fetch the other spy. It has been proved that we have the right man. Therefore, his companion is equally guilty."

Black remorse struck at Joel. He tensed, intending to make a wild break for escape. He knew that he could never hope to get out of this locked room, but there was a possibility that the uproar he created might serve to warn Rawson and give him a fighting chance to escape.

But the man at the table seemed to read his thoughts. He barked a sharp warning. Before Joel could gather himself, Mormons on either side grasped him and held him helpless.

"It's no use," the speaker intoned. "You have been caught red-handed. You, an officer in the United States Army, came here in disguise to spy upon us. You are aware of the penalty for that crime in warfare, I believe. You will be hanged at daybreak for—"

"**N**O!" IT was the girl's frantic voice. She came bursting through the circle, her eyes wild. "Bishop Lowe, you— you promised," she gasped desperately. "You promised that he would only be held a prisoner—and not be hung. He may be a spy, but he saved Heber from that other officer that day in the wagon camp."

Bishop Lowe arose, frowning, and

lifted a hand for silence. "Peace, Sister Delliver," he said gently. "Surely you do not condone the act of a man who came here bent on speeding the destruction of your people?"

"He is a spy," she admitted. "But he was merciful to Heber that day. I have done my duty as a Mormon by bringing about his capture. He is a prisoner, powerless to do any harm now. You gave your word to me that he would not be hung."

A stalwart, bronzed young Mormon of about Joel's age stepped to her side. There was a resemblance that marked him as an older brother of the girl.

"It's the law that all spies must die, Alma," he said uneasily. "Come away—and leave this to the council to decide."

"I won't," the girl said fiercely. "I'd never have shamed myself by acting as a common woman to lead him here to the council chamber if—if I'd known the Bishop wouldn't keep his word."

Bishop Lowe lifted his hands helplessly, smiling.

"The female of the species is far more persistent than the male. Sister Delliver insists on holding me to my bargain not to hang this spy, it seems. I have learned that there is only one way to silence women, and that is to give them their way. It seems that we must forgo the doubtful pleasure of hanging this man."

The girl's face lighted, and she became humble. "God bless you, Bishop!" she breathed.

A twinkle came in the Mormon bishop's eyes. He singled out a black-joweled, stocky man from the group. "I trust, Brother Hatch, that you will keep in mind this method of winning Sister Delliver's favor. I understand she is soon to be sealed to you."

Alma Delliver straightened proudly, flushing. "What!" she snapped angrily. "Sealed to Nate Hatch! To that ugly toad? You are mistaken, Bishop."

The man they addressed as Nate Hatch scowled. "Ye couldn't do better, drat ye," he growled. "There's plenty o' gals that'd jump at the chance to be Nate Hatch's wife."

"I'm not one of them, Nate Hatch," she flashed. "And I don't want you hanging around our ranch, bothering me with your threats and nasty talk. I'll take a bull whip to you if—"

"Peace!" the Bishop interposed hastily. "I suggest that Brother Hatch and Sister Delliver conduct their love-making elsewhere than in the council chamber."

Alma Delliver subsided with a toss of her head at Nate Hatch, who showed buck teeth in a coarse smirk.

The tramp of boots sounded as the door guard admitted a file of armed Mormons. In their midst was Mort Rawson. His wrists were bound and he was torn and disheveled. Several of his captors showed marks of the resistance he had made to arrest. He was marched to the table.

The Bishop motioned Alma Delliver and her younger brother forward. "Is this the man?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Yes," the girl said, and the boy nodded.

Mort Rawson fixed Joel with hot, accusing gaze. "I told you a woman would some day be the death of you, Tarbell," he gritted. "And it seems that you've dragged me with you. A fine mess you've made of things. You couldn't resist a pair of pretty eyes, could you?"

Joel was sick at heart. "You're right, Rawson," he admitted bitterly. "I got you into this."

Alma Delliver spoke up swiftly. "Don't blame your comrade. It wasn't his fault. My brother and I recognized both of you this afternoon when you passed our ranchhouse south of town. We notified the council at once. You have been watched ever since. You would have been caught in any event."

The bishop excused the Dellivers then, and the girl left the room with her two brothers. Before the door closed she flashed a quick glance back at Joel. There was an apology and a plea for understanding in her eyes. But Joel remained stonily indifferent.

Bishop Lowe's expression became bleak and cold as the door closed. He motioned Nate Hatch forward.

"Take these men under close guard to the guardhouse at the encampment, Brother Hatch. They may wish to write a last word to relatives or friends. I will issue an order for their execution by a firing squad at dawn!"

A dead silence fell. Joel stared, stunned. Firing squad!

Nate Hatch chuckled harshly. "I didn't figure you were soft enough to let these sneakin' spies off jest because of a woman's whim, Bishop."

The bishop shrugged. "I would prefer that Sister Delliver remain in blissful ignorance of their fate. I am guilty of splitting hairs, I confess. I promised her only that they would not be hanged. An evasion, no doubt, but tact is necessary in dealing with the fair sex, Brother Hatch. The ladies do not understand the harsh necessities of war. These men must die, regardless of extenuating circumstances."

CHAPTER FIVE

An Army Comes Awake

NATE HATCH took sardonic pleasure in performing his assignment. Under his command, Joel and Mort Rawson were marched out of the council house. Saddled horses were ready at the rear, and the prisoners were lashed to their mounts.

Boxed in by a dozen riders, they swept down dark streets out of the Mormon capital. South of town the route swung eastward up the rising plain toward the lowering mass of the Wasatch range.

Joel and Rawson rode side by side in silence. Self-reproach tortured Joel, for Rawson made it plain that he placed the entire blame on him, ignoring the fact that the real cause of their predicament dated back to the day he had attempted to bully young Heber Delliver.

They followed a wide, beaten highway for half a dozen miles as it mounted into a timbered basin in the foothills. The gloom of green trees shadowed them as, ahead, a sentry sounded a challenge. Nate Hatch gave a password, and they trotted on. Then Joel and Mort Rawson stared around with sudden interest.

They had found the Mormon military stronghold! Peering around, straining their eyes against the darkness, they saw the evidence of a sizable encampment in the pleasant, hidden basin. Long rows of shacks built of brush and mud showed in the starlight. Ahead was the level, cleared expanse of a drill ground.

The camp was asleep now, but carried the indefinite murmur of a large force of men. Joel saw the hooded outline of many supply wagons in line off the drill ground. From the distance came the sound of hundreds of grazing horses and oxen.

Candlelight showed in the windows of a stone structure, which evidently had been a Mormon ranchhouse and was now being used as a military headquarters. Nate Hatch called a halt there. The prisoners were taken to the rear, where a long structure, a half-dugout, served as a guardhouse.

By the flickering light of a tallow candle, they were prodded into one of a line of cells. Nate Hatch tossed buffalo robes at their feet.

"I don't reckon you'll be in the frame of mind for sleepin' on yore last night of life," he said with a snicker. "But if yuh do, I'll wake yuh up when yore time comes. If there's any last messages yuh want sent, you kin ask the guards for quills an' writin' sheets."

Hatch left the candle in the cell. The heavy door of split cedar poles closed, and the tramp of receding boots died away.

Rawson cursed bitterly. "We found the Mormon army, now that it's too late. It's my guess that at least three thousand men are under arms here, drilling and outfitting to resist Johnston's advance. That is a force big enough to cause plenty of trouble. Our men likely will march into a crushing defeat, all because you couldn't resist the smile of a cheap, little—"

Joel's restraint exploded. "Quit your whining. We're not dead yet. Let's try to get out of here, instead of insulting a girl who did her best to save us from execution."

"We haven't got a chance," Rawson ground out. "That door would hold a herd of buffalo. And these damned walls are of stone and hard mortar a foot thick."

Joel inspected the cell. A narrow slit in the outer wall admitted air and starlight, but its six-inch width precluded any hope of escape. The door looked equally hopeless. From the musty smell, Joe guessed that their prison had originally served as a potato storehouse. Cedar logs had been used to partition the interior into cells. A man, if he had the time and the tools, might cut an opening through these side walls, but the Mormons had stripped the prisoners of every scrap of metal.

Rawson's despairing estimate of their situation seemed correct.

G RIMLY Joel kicked at a packrat that scurried out of the shadows. The rodent vanished with a squeak into a hole under one of the cedar walls.

The dirt floor at that point showed many mounds of earth thrown up by the rats. Suddenly Joel went down on his knees and began testing the hardness of the soil at that point.

Rawson came near, suddenly tense. "There's a chance," Joel breathed. "It's honeycombed by packrats."

"But it only leads into the next cell," Rawson pointed out. "We'd be no better off."

They knew by the snores of sleeping men that there were many other prisoners in the guardhouse—refractory Gentiles or Mormon militia men serving terms for infractions of discipline no doubt.

"That next cell *might* be empty. An', if so, the chances are the door won't be barred," Joel gritted. "Anyway, it's a fighting chance. It's better than waiting to be lined up against a wall."

They formulated their plan swiftly. To allay suspicion, they called the guards and asked for writing material, adopting the attitude of men resigned to death. They listened to the retreating footfalls of the three guards, who preferred the outer air. Then they attacked the earth with their bare fingers.

The clay soil was stubborn, impregnated with pebbles and roots. Their finger tips were soon raw and bleeding. But they made progress. The packrat burrows, which had broken down the structure of the hard earth, made the task possible.

Within an hour, Joel wormed his way silently through the excavation they had made under the log wall. He drew a deep breath of satisfaction as he rose to his feet in the darkness of the adjoining cell. It was not occupied. When he crept to the door, it swung slightly ajar at his cautious touch.

A moment later Rawson joined him. Peering out, they could see the outline of the two guards against the stars in the open entrance at the north end of the line of cells. The opposite portal appeared to be clear. They moved silently down the line in that direction.

Mounting the flat stones that served as steps, Joel edged a glance outside, then

shrank back. The third guard stood leaning against the low stone wall beside the doorway.

Joel gathered himself—leaped swiftly, silently. His fingers closed on the throat of the sentinel. But the man was husky, and despite the surprise of the onslaught, he hurled himself staggeringly sidewise before Rawson could come to Joel's help. With a frantic surge, the man broke Joel's grip and sounded a hoarse, frenzied shout.

Joel swung a fist that knocked the man down. But the guards at the opposite end of the structure had responded with yells and were coming at a run.

Joel and Rawson raced toward the shadows of nearby brush. Before they reached that sanctuary two rifles spat wickedly behind them. Joel heard the whir and snap of one bullet past his ear. And Mort Rawson, with a groan, staggered and went partly to his knees.

Joel checked his stride and lifted Rawson to his feet. "Hit?" he rasped.

"Yes," Rawson gasped. "My arm."

Joel half-carried the wounded man through the dense blackness of the brush. Then the first shock wore off, and Rawson was able to race along without help. They fell flat suddenly, and let the pursuing Mormon guards run, panting and shouting, past them in the darkness.

The Mormon camp was aroused. A wild uproar rolled through the night.

They pushed to their left at a trot, and came unexpectedly to open starlight. A company street of Mormon military huts lay ahead. They crouched down, at a loss as to direction or plan.

Dimly, a dozen yards away, a booted man appeared. He was dragging two saddled horses from a picket line to where an officer was bawling for his night horse and his orderly.

Joel's hand closed on Rawson's unwounded arm. "There's our only chance," he breathed.

They burst from the shadows, were

upon the orderly before he discovered them. He fell as Joel swung his fists twice.

Rawson caught the released reins of the two animals. Then they were in the saddle whirling their mounts.

CHAPTER SIX

Help from an Enemy

WILD shouts arose as the escaping pair were sighted. Guns began to spang wildly. Joel and Rawson swept into the trees again, chancing disaster in a collision with limbs or cottonwood trunks. Their luck held, and they came out on a booming creek that glinted in the starlight. Joel's horse fell in crossing the stream, pitching him into icy water. But the animal came to its feet unhurt, and Joel lifted himself, dripping back into the saddle.

The Mormon camp was behind them as they veered down the benches. After two miles of breakneck riding, Joel called a halt. There appeared to be no immediate danger of capture.

"Let's take a look at that arm," he said, dismounting.

Rawson almost fell from the saddle. The rifle ball had pierced his left arm between the elbow and shoulder, though the bone had not been touched. It was an ugly wound, bleeding freely. Joel made a tourniquet of strips from his hunting shirt, and helped Rawson back into the saddle.

"We've got to reach the mountains and find cover," he said. "There's no hiding place in the damned sage flats of the valley—not even for a jackrabbit."

But after another mile they heard the rumor of many riders on their flank. Mormon cavalry was stringing out east of them, laying a deadline along the base of the mountains to prevent their escape from the valley.

They were forced farther out in the flats. It soon became evident that they were being hemmed in by a wide-flung

circle. The benches were now swarming with hundreds of Mormon riders. More than once the two men halted their horses below the crest of sage swells as the galloping patrols passed too close for comfort.

The closing circle forced them inexorably in the direction they least wanted to go—nearer the scattered lights of Salt Lake City. At last they found themselves riding through the potato and grain fields south of the Mormon capital.

Rawson was swaying in the saddle and hanging to the horn. He was at the end of his endurance—and, in the distance, the sound of searching riders came from all directions.

Without warning, a rifle spat redly from the night. With a curse, Joel saw the outline of a farm house and knew they had been sighted by an awakened Mormon.

They raced their lathered horses across a great wheat field, but that shot had attracted the searchers. The roar of hoofs grew louder and many men began shouting hoarsely behind them.

Abruptly another Mormon ranchhouse, with a straw-thatched gable, loomed up near at hand. At that moment Rawson began to topple. Joel leaped to the ground and eased his fall, but the move gave the horses their freedom. The animals escaped into the darkness, leaving the fugitives afoot.

Joel bent down, and came up with Rawson slung across his shoulder. Capture seemed certain, but it was not in his nature to stand passively and await it. He headed toward the Mormon house. If he could find a gun, a knife, an ax—anything, he would at least die fighting.

The door opened when he was a few paces from it. He halted in despair as he saw the glint of a gun barrel in the first faint glimmer of dawn.

"Halt!" It was a girl's tense voice. "Lift your hands."

"Yeah!" a boy chimed in. "We'll blast yuh to ribbons if yuh come a step nearer."

Explosive, futile rage exploded in Joel. He recognized those voices. Fate had once more played an ironic jest upon him. He was the prisoner of the brown-eyed, alluring Mormon girl, Alma Delliver, and her freckled young brother.

JOEL heard the girl utter a startled little exclamation.

"Blazes, Allie!" her brother blurted out. "It's them two Gentile spies. An' the one he's carryin' looks like he's dead, maybe."

"Stay where you are," the girl warned shakily. She moved into view in the doorway, a dim figure in a heavy white nightgown, with a cocked shotgun in her hands. "How did you get here? You have escaped, haven't you?"

"This man is badly wounded," Joel returned bitterly. "At least, have the humanity to do what you can to ease his suffering. Your people will soon be here to take charge of me."

There was an instant of silence. Then: "Bring him into the house, but don't forget that I'll fire if you come near us. Keep your distance. Heber, light a taper."

The boy complied. With Alma Delliver

backing away in front of him, her gun leveled, Joel carried his unconscious companion to an inner room. The girl motioned him to lay Rawson on a bed.

"Get some rope, Heber," she commanded. "We'll tie up this one. Then I'll do what I can for the wounded man."

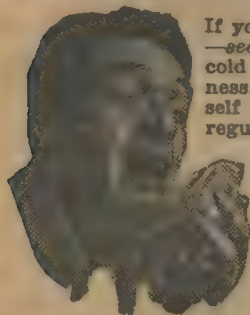
Joel weighed his chances of leaping across the room and wresting the gun away from her. He realized that it would be suicide. He could not hope to evade the blast of buckshot from the sawed muzzle. But it also meant death to passively await the riders, whose coming was presaged by the increased shouting in the faint dawn.

Mort Rawson stirred, and suddenly lifted his voice in a hoarse, delirious outburst. "Get me out of here, Tarbell," he panted. "Out of this damned cell! They're going to march us in front of a firing squad at dawn. At dawn, I tell you! We're going to be shot down like dogs! It's all your fault. You let that cursed girl betray us. Get me out of here, I tell you!"

Alma Delliver looked at Joel, startled. "What does he mean?" she demanded, a sudden dreadful doubt in her eyes. "You were not to die. The Bishop promised—"

"Only that we would not be hung,"

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Joel finished ironically. "But a firing squad does the job equally as well."

"Firing squad!" Rawson raved. "For God's sake, Tarbell, dig faster! Dawn is coming. We die at dawn! Ha! Ha! You sold our lives to win a kiss from a Mormon wench."

Then Rawson's head fell back in a stupor. The shotgun wavered in Alma Delliver's hands.

"Is—is that true?" she asked with sudden pathos.

Joel stared at her. Dawn was building up with a rush, dimming the candlelight in the room. In the gray radiance, the Mormon girl, with her brown hair a thick cascade over her shoulders, the heavy nightgown covering her body with shapeless modesty, was a picture of tragic bafflement.

The boom of galloping hoofs sounded loud now, and Heber Delliver uttered a sob. "I ain't goin' to let 'em shoot him, even if he is a spy. He took my part that day."

The girl suddenly turned and snuffed the candle. She looked at Joel with frantic appeal.

"I've heard that there is such a thing as honor even among Gentile Army officers," she said tensely. "If I hide you here, will you promise that you will never attempt to escape? Will you give your solemn oath?"

Joel's square face was hard and angry. "No," he grated. "I'll make no bargains with you. I escaped once. I'll escape again."

Her eyes became bright. "You *shall* promise it," she panted. "You must! Don't you understand? I was the cause of your capture. I'll always feel that your blood is on my hands, if they kill you. But you are a dangerous enemy of my people. I am a Mormon, and you Gentiles are bent on destroying us. I can't let you go. You see that, don't you?"

Riders were charging up to the house. The thick, coarse voice of Nate Hatch lifted an impatient hail.

The girl suddenly handed the shotgun to her brother. "Don't let him leave this room, Heber," she breathed.

ALMA DELLIVER turned and sped through the house to the front door. Her voice came clearly.

"What do you want, Nate Hatch, coming here at this hour, frightening people out of their wits?"

"Them cussed spies broke out'n the guard house at midnight," Hatch yelled. "They was last seen headin' this way. They ought to be close around here."

"Well, of all the blundering fools!" the girl responded scathingly. "After I go to the trouble of trapping your spies, you men let them escape! What are you gaping at me for? Get moving! Take your staring friends and go find them. Or do you want to look under my bed to see if they're hidden there?"

A rumble of mirth came from Hatch's men. He swore roundly.

"Sassy, ain't yuh? Yuh figger you're quite some gal since you held the Bishop to his promise not to string them Gentiles up, I reckon. Haw! Haw! There's more'n one way o' skinnin' a skunk, Sister Delliver. An' more'n one way of rubbin' out a sneakin' spy. Come on, boys! She won't be so pert after she's sealed to me. The first wife will put her in her place. Let's search the barn. Them two might be holed up there."

As the spurred horses thundered away, the girl returned to the room. She was shaking now. With a glance at Joel that was half-defiant, half-challenging, she went to Mort Rawson's side. She did not flinch as she ripped away his shirt and made a quick examination of his wound.

"He's lost a fearful amount of blood," she exclaimed. "If you'll help me, I will

do what I can for him. Heber, keep that gun ready—and shoot if necessary.

Joel could have disarmed the boy with a sweep of his arm. But he could not bring himself to it. Instead, he moved to the bed and was extremely efficient as he assisted the girl in cleansing and bandaging the ugly bullet hole through the flesh of Rawson's arm.

"Why did you do it?" Joel suddenly burst out. "If your people ever learn that you have shielded spies. . . ." He left it unfinished.

She looked at him steadily. "I was responsible for your capture, but I don't want to be the cause of your death. Don't misunderstand me. You are the enemy of my people. I'm going to keep you here, until you can do no harm to the Mormon cause. Will you give me your word of honor that you will not attempt escape?"

Joel's answer was unyielding. "No. I'm a soldier—and there is such a thing as duty. You had better hand us over to the militia."

She stared at him, angry and baffled. Then she took the gun from the hands of her brother.

"I have a duty, too," she blazed. "To myself and to my people! I've tried to save your life, but if you attempt to escape from this house I'll kill you with my own hands. I swear it. . . ."

"Heber, we'll lock them in the root cellar. Take some blankets down there—also the mattress off my bed for the wounded man."

Joel might have chanced an attempt to disarm her. But he abandoned the thought as soon as it took form. This girl was risking disgrace to save them, to satisfy her own code of honor.

At her command, he carried Mort Rawson into the kitchen and squeezed through a trap door that opened into a flight of steps, leading down to a cool, stone-walled vegetable cellar.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Coward's Getaway

JOEL sat beside the mattress on which Rawson lay. Alma Delliver had been at his side almost constantly, soothing him, while her young brother stood guard over the stairs with a buckshot gun. Now Rawson lay sleeping heavily, and Joel believed that his life had been saved.

The trap door was closed and barred now. The girl and her brother were going about the ranch chores. She had told Joel briefly that her father and elder brother were in the Mormon militia. Her mother had died during the rigors of the ill-fated handcart migration of 1856.

During the day Joel had heard riders passing by, carrying on the search for the fugitives. Nate Hatch had come back to the house once, but not to search for the missing men. He had tried to make love to Alma, in a coarse, arrogant manner, but she had driven him out at the point of a shotgun, sending him on his way.

When darkness came, the girl unbarred the trap and descended, bringing a steaming platter of food. She tested Rawson's fever, nodded approvingly. As she turned to leave, Joel touched her arm.

"Why are you taking such a risk?" he demanded.

In the candlelight her expression was obscure. "I've explained that. I would feel responsible if you were executed."

"Yet you would kill me if I tried to escape."

"Yes. You have spied on us, and possess military secrets that would be disastrous to the Mormon cause. I could not betray my people by letting you escape."

"It is said that you Mormons plan to set up a new empire here and secede from the Union," Joel pointed out.

"That's a lie. We only want to live in

peace. And you Gentiles only want to rob us. We were persecuted and driven out of Missouri, then out of Illinois. We retreated into this desert that you Gentiles believed was worthless. Now that we've conquered this land and shown that it can be made fruitful, you want to take it away from us."

"There is misunderstanding on both sides," Joel mused. Suddenly he took possession of her hand. "I'm not your enemy, Alma. Nor do I approve of the persecution of the Mormon people."

"Then why did you come here to spy on us?"

"There is such a thing as a soldier's duty. In war, a man is called upon to do many distasteful things."

"Yes," she agreed wearily. "That is so. I hold no grudge against you, Lieutenant Tarbell."

Joel forced her to look up at him. "Alma, is it true that you are to become the wife of Nate Hatch?"

Her eyes took fire. "That brute? Never! I am resolved never to marry at all."

"Never?" Joel demanded.

She drew away from him and hurriedly began ascending the steps. Her answer came floating back—a mere murmur: "Well, perhaps never."

MMORT RAWSON'S recovery was maddeningly slow. His wound seemed to be healing swiftly, yet Rawson complained of weakness. He spent most of his time lying on the mattress in sullen silence.

From the first, it had been understood between them that they would escape as soon as Rawson was fit to travel.

"We'll grab that damned girl and make her show us a safe trail out of this cursed valley," Rawson had snarled when the matter was first broached. "It'll be easy. She thinks that we're resigned to imprisonment here, and is growing careless."

Joel whirled on him. "We don't lay a hand on Alma Delliver, you rat," he snapped. "She saved your life and mine. Do you think I aim to browbeat her after what she's done for us?"

"You're a soft-headed fool, Tarbell. She's nothing but a cheap Mormon wench, who—"

Joel's hand closed on Rawson's shoulder, jerking him to a sitting position. "Don't ever mention that girl again, Rawson," he said.

"You righteous fool!" Rawson raged. "How else can we get out of this rat-hole? There's a citation and a promotion waiting for me back there, and you're willing to risk my chances of winning it."

Joel threw him back on the mattress with a gesture of repulsion. "You'll get your promotion, Rawson. I'm only waiting until you're strong enough to ride. I've been chipping away at the mortar around a foundation stone with that broken mule shoe I found. I can push that stone out whenever we're ready. We'll leave at night. There are horses in the corral. We can be fifty miles away before she even knows that we're gone."

As he said it, there was black depression in Joel's heart as he pictured the self-reproach and anguish that his escape would bring Alma Delliver. But he had no alternative. Johnston's army was coming, marching toward what might be a bloody engagement with the Mormon militia. A warning of the Mormon preparations might change the strategy of Johnston's campaign.

Joel knew that it was Johnston's hope that the Mormons would be induced to submit, once they realized that the federal government meant business. But a fatal clash at this time would have but one result—a prolonged and savage civil war.

Mort Rawson had lapsed into silence. He had scoffed at Joel's attempt to dig away the hard mortar in the foundation.

Now he lay there, with a calculating gleam in his eye. And though he feigned a delayed recovery, he was fit and ready to travel—far more fit than either Joel or the girl suspected.

He lay there now in the increasing gloom of twilight, regarding Joel through slitted lids, while a thin smile pulled at his lips. Mort Rawson had never forgotten the feel of Joel's hard fists that day at the Delliver wagon. And his hatred had grown to a consuming flame.

JOEL could hear Alma working in the kitchen. He waited impatiently for her to open the trap and call them up for their customary hour of fresh air and exercise in the darkness of the ranch yard. At such times she always stood guard over them.

She was alone in the house, for her younger brother was away helping a neighbor with his crops.

Joel heard her approach the trap and remove the bars that battened it. Then came a pause. He could hear her startled gasp.

"What are you doing, sneaking around here, you ugly goat?" she cried out.

The kitchen door slammed. A rumbling chuckle rolled through the house. It was the thick voice of Nate Hatch that responded.

"Can't a man call on his best gal without bein' invited."

"Get out of here, Nate," Alma returned scornfully. "Dad and Jess would take a whip to you if they knew how you were annoying me."

"They ain't likely to interfere tonight," Hatch chuckled. "They're marchin' with the militia up Parley's Pass on their way to fight the Gentiles. The advance guard o' Johnston's army has reached the Echo Canyon, an' we don't aim to let 'em come no farther. Maybe yore men-folk won't never come back alive. But, anyway, you'll be livin' in Nate Hatch's house by that time."

Rawson sat up, listening tensely. "Did you hear that, Tarbell?" he breathed. "The Mormons are marching to attack our outfit. That means war!"

There was a quick flurry in the kitchen, and a cry of fury and fear from the girl. "No, yuh don't," Hatch snarled. "Keep away from that shotgun, yuh damned little hellcat. Yuh ain't drivin' me out'n here with a gun ag'in. Yuh might as well make up yore mind to treat me with respect. I got permission from the Bishop today to seal us."

"I'll never be sealed to you," the girl panted.

There was the sound of a scuffle. "I'm sick o' trucklin' to your notions," Hatch raged. "Yo're comin' with me to the Bishop's house now—tonight."

Joel leaped up the steps, threw back the unbarred trap and hurtled into the room, like an avenging spirit rising from the depths. Nate Hatch whirled. For the space of a heart-beat, he stood stricken with shock. Then he dug frantically for his holstered cap and ball gun.

Joel took a long, savage stride, his fist driving. The blow connected as Hatch flipped the gun and fired wildly. The bullet missed Joel by inches. Before Hatch could pull the hammer again, Joel knocked the gun from his grasp. Hatch turned, floundered into the front room, seeking to escape from the house, but Joel caught up with him and dragged him back from the door.

Again Joel's fist drove in. The next two punches made a shambles of Nate Hatch's thick features. The man reeled against a wall, then sat down, groaning and dazed.

Joel stepped back, breathing fast. Alma, her eyes wide, moved to his side, and both of them were wondering what could be done with Nate Hatch, who had accidentally stumbled upon Alma's secret.

Then Alma gave a choked gasp of warning—and Joel whirled. Too late! He

caught a glimpse of Mort Rawson, standing with eyes blazing and teeth showing as he swung the barrel of the gun that Nate Hatch had dropped. Joel tried to duck, but the gun muzzle crashed on his head. He dropped limply, like a pole-axed steer.

Alma screamed. Like a tigress, she leaped at Rawson. He hurled her aside with a brutal sweep of his arm.

"When your Gentile sweetheart wakes up," he snarled, "tell him that if he ever shows his face within reach of the Army, I'll see to it that he is cashiered and drummed out of the service."

Nate Hatch was beginning to stir and sat up dazedly. Seeing that, Rawson turned and raced from the house to the corral, where saddle horses were to be had for the taking.

With a moan of defeat, Alma knelt beside Joel and lifted his bleeding head into her lap. She spoke softly to him as she bent over his still form.

Nate Hatch came shakily to his feet, glaring around with mounting triumph.

JOEL was unconscious for more than an hour. When at last he opened his eyes, he was looking up into Alma's pale face. She still had his head in her lap, and was bathing his scalp wound, a tearless misery in her face.

Gradually Joel realized that the room was crowded. Staring, accusing faces of men and women from neighboring ranches were watching them. Nate Hatch, bruised but gloating, was striding about importantly.

"I tell yuh she ought tuh be pitched an' feathered," Hatch was raging. "She was hidin' them sneakin' Gentile spies right here in her own house. One of 'em got away, but this rat here will go to the firin' squad, come daylight, thanks to me."

Joel looked up at Alma. "Rawson?" he asked hoarsely.

"He has escaped," she told him.

A sallow-faced woman advanced on Alma like a virago, her eyes blazing. "Traitor! Jezebel! Living in sin with the enemies of your people! The women of Zion should stone ye into the desert."

There came a wild roar of approval. "Banish her! Banish the shameless minx! Hang the Gentile spy!"

Vengeful hands tore Alma away from Joel. He came staggering to his feet, frantic horror in his soul, swinging his fists weakly in an attempt to reach her side. But men leaped on him and bore him down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Man Who Stopped an Army

JOEL paced his cell. He had been brought back to the guard house at the militia encampment from which he and Rawson had escaped the week before. There was no hope of escape this time. Two armed Mormons kept vigil at the door of his cell all during the night. A death watch!

The first pallor of dawn crept into the guard house. And Joel heard the measured tramp of boots, as a squad of men were marched to position somewhere nearby. It was his firing squad.

He was ready when they came for him. With drill-straight pride, he marched between files of somber Mormons out into the gray hush of dawn. He took his place with his back to a 'dobe wall.

A prayer for Alma Delliver ran in his mind as he stood there. She would be an outcast—disgraced among her own people, shunned. It was hard to die with that on his conscience. It was hell to leave a world in which Alma Delliver lived. He loved her. He admitted that now. And he believed that she loved him.

A taut voice gave an order. The line of riflemen jerked their guns to the "ready."

"Aim!"

Rattling wheels and pounding hoofs swelled up through the dawn. A girl's frantic scream mingled with the hoarse shouts of oncoming men.

"Stop! In the name of heaven!"

A carriage, flanked by half a dozen Mormon riders careened to a stop. At a command, the firing squad grounded guns.

Joel, like a man who had come back from the tomb, saw a face he had never expected to look upon again. Alma Delliver was in that carriage. He saw the horror and heart-felt thanksgiving in her eyes, as she dismounted, her whole body trembling.

Also from the carriage stepped a man in severe, dark broadcloth, with powerful features. His commanding personality instantly dominated the scene. He said something to the Mormon officer. Then Joel was marched to the ranch-house that served as Mormon military headquarters.

There he found himself facing the grim, gray scrutiny of the man whose arrival had stayed his execution. And only Alma Delliver, standing to one side, remained in the room with them.

"I am Brigham Young," the man said without preliminary.

Joel's heels came together and he jerked to attention, staring.

Brigham Young! Zealot and visionary! The man who was denounced by his accusers as a scheming bigamist, and defended by his followers as their man of destiny! Trail blazer and empire builder; undefeated leader of a cause that a lesser man would have abandoned long ago; the inspiration of the mightiest epic of pioneering courage in the history of the continent! Brigham Young stood there, a hand hooked in his coat pocket.

HE ADDRESSED Joel tersely. "You are one of two United States Army officers who came here to spy upon the

Mormon people. Sister Delliver came to me in frantic haste during the night and told me your story."

"What Miss Delliver has done was dictated by her conscience before God," Joel responded. "There was no disloyalty to her people. She is innocent of any wrong-doing."

Brigham Young waved that impatiently aside. "There are matters of more importance. This other officer who escaped? What information does he carry regarding Mormon military plans?"

Joel studied the question, and saw no harm in answering. "That you plan to resist General Johnston's advance," he said bluntly. "That your militia is even now marching toward Echo Canyon to engage Johnston's advance guard."

"It is mistaken information that may do grave harm," Brigham Young thundered. "We do not plan to attack. We stand ready to defend ourselves only if we are assailed. Our motives have been misrepresented. We do not seek war. We want only justice. We are willing to receive any governor the federal government sends to take my place. We will not even oppose the peaceful coming of the troops to this valley—provided they do not attempt to seize Salt Lake City. We will not be driven out of the homes we have built with untold sacrifice and privation."

Joel looked at him with pinched brows. He knew that General Johnston's prime object was to solve the Mormon problem without bloodshed. But the chances were that Mort Rawson had reached the advance guard by this time with his report that the Mormons intended immediate attack. That information would set the advancing dragoons on a hair-trigger. They would be certain to open fire at the first glimpse of Mormon militiamen. Once the guns opened up, it would be war to the hilt.

Brigham Young was eyeing him as though reading his thoughts. "You perceive the dire possibilities in this situation, young man," he said grimly. "Go to your General Johnston. I am releasing you so that you can carry a true report of the Mormon attitude to your commander. Tell him that his soldiers are free to enter our valley—provided they do not attempt to occupy Salt Lake City."

His voice rose to a booming thunder. "Before we will let them seize the city that we have slaved to build in this wasteland, we will destroy it to the last foundation stone. Thirty thousand honest men, women and children stand ready to abandon their homes and flee into the desert. We will burn Salt Lake City to the ground rather than turn it over to invaders. We found this valley a desert when we came. We will leave it a desert if we are forced to flee from it."

"Put that in writing, sir" Joel snapped. "And furnish me with the fastest horse available."

Brigham Young called for pen and paper. He began hurriedly writing a dispatch that was destined to influence the course of a nation.

Joel turned to Alma Delliver. She came into his arms, her eyes shy and bright. Brigham Young glanced up, scowling absently at the sight of this Mormon girl in the arms of a Gentile army spy. Then he shrugged and went on with his writing.

"I'm going with you, Joel," she breathed.

"Yes," he told her. "Always. We'll always be together after this."

THE advance guard of Johnston's army was retreating eastward out of Echo Canyon, the narrow gorge fifty miles east of Salt Lake City through which ran the Mormon trail. After Brimstone Bob Sanderson, dusty, whiskery and grim, had heard the report that Mort Rawson had

made to him that morning, he had deemed it wise to withdraw out of this narrow gorge and await the coming of the main column under Johnston before inviting the expected Mormon attack.

Mort Rawson rode at the colonel's side, his mood cheery as he thought of the captain's bars that soon would adorn his shoulder straps.

A stir of interest ran along the weary column of dragoons. Rawson, looking back, gradually lifted in his stirrups, staring incredulously. A rider in ragged buckskins and a girl in masculine garb were loping up to the head of the column on lathered, jaded horses.

Joel's stony eyes met Rawson's dazed gaze with a grim promise. He saluted the dumbfounded colonel.

"Lieutenant Tarbell reporting, sir" he said, "with a dispatch for General Johnston. You are at liberty to read the dispatch also, sir."

Brimstone Bob Sanderson swallowed, seemingly at a loss for words. He failed to respond to Joel's salute. A sudden grimness came over him.

"You are under arrest, Tarbell," he growled uncertainly. "Lieutenant Rawson accuses you of gross neglect of duty, of conduct unbecoming an officer, and of consorting with the enemy. He accuses you of keeping him a prisoner in a Mormon house and preventing him from returning to his command with important military information."

"Lieutenant Rawson is a yellow-bellied, fork-tongued liar," Joel responded icily.

Rawson began to bluster. "I'll prove every charge I have made against you, Tarbell," he raged. "You can't brazen this out. Why, damn me, if this girl with you isn't the same Mormon trollop that you—"

Joel leaned from the saddle, swung a fist—and knocked Lieutenant Mort Rawson and his fine uniform into the dust.

Brimstone Bob went crimson. He open-

ed his mouth to call Joel's arrest. Then he paused. He was looking at Alma Delliver's flushed, pretty face and fine eyes. Rawson had gone to great lengths to tell the colonel how Joel had been seduced into betrayal of his trust by a Mormon temptress.

Alma looked at the colonel with a smile—and Brimstone Bob had not seen a pretty white woman smile in many months.

"Don't arrest Joel for that, sir," she pleaded. "You see, Joel loves me. We're going to be married."

Brimstone Bob filled his lungs. "Detachment, halt!" he bellowed. And the command ran down the line.

Joel extended a linen envelope, addressed in a powerful hand to General Albert Sidney Johnston. "A message, sir, from Brigham Young," he said, "in which he denies any intention of armed resistance to the seating of the new governor of Utah."

Looking down at Mort Rawson, who was rising to his feet, Joel added: "And Lieutenant Tarbell requests that the colonel grant him fifteen minutes before assigning him to duty. Also that the colonel grant Lieutenant Rawson a similar recess. Lieutenant Tarbell has further business to transact with Lieutenant Rawson, which business can be carried out more satisfactorily up the trail, out of sight."

Brimstone Bob Sanderson opened the envelope and read the missive. He read it again, a startled look on his face. Presently he looked up at Joel.

"Request granted," he said gruffly.

THERE were no witnesses to what happened during those fifteen minutes after Joel and Mort Rawson walked out of sight around a shoulder of the gorge. Alma Delliver sat, pale and nervous, biting her lip and holding back the tears. The colonel stood by his horse, reflectively chewing a stem of grass.

Only Joel came walking back. There was a bruise on one cheekbone and he had a puffed lip. His knuckles were bleeding.

"Lieutenant Rawson is indisposed, sir," he reported. "He needs the attention of the company surgeon, I believe. He will recover, however, I'm afraid."

"Confound you, Tarbell," the colonel muttered. "I want all the details as soon as you find time to relieve an impatient man's curiosity. Rawson always was a bounder."

The colonel filled his lungs again, and gave the command that turned the advance back once more—toward Salt Lake City.

And with them rode Lieutenant Joel Tarbell and a soft-eyed, smiling Mormon girl.

THE END

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By JAMES P. OLSEN

(Author of "Hangnoose Fugitive," etc.)

Sonora King stepped forward. "You saw him draw first," he said. "You better swear to that."



SATAN SWEARS A BADGE-TOTER

Inspot Smith, Hondo's fighting editor, volunteered for the suicide-badge that no one else dared wear. . . . For, with "yellow" courage, he had printed the challenge to the killers' rule of terror—and it was up to him to prove his claim that a coward may sometimes be the greatest hero!

ART CAMP had defied Sonora King. That was yesterday. Today Art Camp was dead.

Inkspot Smith, the editor of the weekly, stood in the broiling sunshine and watched the neighbors of Art Camp bring the body in. The spring wagon came slowly up the street and stopped before the undertaking parlor and hardware store. Little clouds of dust settled slowly back upon the street.

Inkspot's stained hands were clenched. His eyes, oddly chill, squinted behind the lenses of his steel-rimmed spectacles. He watched bareheaded men carry Art Camp inside, his thoughts at war against the sullen solitude possessing this Texas cowtown.

The sun seemed to assume a glowering brassiness; the few people on the street did not speak. A depressing sense of unrest, of fear, of dread expectancy mantled Hondo town.

The dust hardly had settled in the street when Sonora King and his two men rode into town. A few men moved off the street; others stared from under lowered brows. Inkspot Smith swallowed, and his hand unconsciously lowered toward his belt, although he wore no guns.

Sonora, huge and lithe, dark and arrogant, swung off-saddle onto the hotel porch. Fox Doak followed Sonora King into the hotel bar. But the third man in this trouble-trio did not stop. He rode on up the street to Doc Dell's little office. Inkspot noticed that this man, Scorpion Snaith, limped on a favored left leg as he dismounted and entered the doctor's office.

Inkspot went back inside *The Hondo Globe* building. He sat down at his desk, piled with old papers, cluttered with copy, advertisements, an asthmatic old typewriter and dust. And he sat staring out into the blinding sunlight through the dusty window.

The "staff" of Inkspot Smith's weekly

paper came around the high typecases and old flatbed press in the rear. He stood there expectantly with a type stick in his hands. Denny Wade was young and full of fool ideas. He was going to be a great newspaper man some day; figured to know more now than old Inkspot did.

"This Art Camp getting killed," Denny Wade said. "It's our chance to run a big scare headline and make up like the El Paso and Santone rags do. A murder mystery—"

"Hold it, Denny," Inkspot sighed. "Ain't no mystery at all." Patiently, as though Denny Wade did not already know it, Inkspot pointed out: "Six months ago this Sonora and his gunhands come to these parts. Took up on that old abandoned Ralf section south of here. A few weeks later rustling starts—rustling, beefing, steers shot and left laying."

Inkspot pawed for his old briar pipe, his eyes still focused on the street. "This ain't a country of cow barons, but a range of decent, law-abiding little ranchers. They can't stand them sort of losses. And then Sonora King, he comes to them. For so much per head, he tells them he'll protect these folks' stock from the rustlers and beefers."

"I never heard of—"

"Ain't new, Denny," Inkspot cut in. "It's a game that's been worked, one way or another, since the days of roaming knights. Anyhow, a lot of folks stormed up at Sonora. But the sheriff, he ain't worried about these parts down here. Said he had no proof. And them that riled up at Sonora King, they lost more beef, and their irrigation ditches and alfalfa fields was ruined."

Inkspot broke off. Doc Dell was cutting across the street, angling as though to go to the Hondo City Marshal's office. Inkspot stirred. "So folks got to paying. A few got shot at, and some got hit. Now Art Camp is dead. Fear is running the town, Denny. It needs a two-gun, old-

fashioned law to go against Sonora King and his kind."

"Old-fashioned law!" Denny scoffed. "That's what's the matter now. They don't get proof of these things. What're we goin' to do about Camp?"

"Just wait a bit, Denny. Paper ain't out until tomorrow, remember."

DENNY WADE grunted and went back to the shop. Inkspot got up and stood in the doorway, sucking thoughtfully on his pipe. He saw Doc Dell come out of the marshal's little office. Inkspot strolled up there and went inside.

Newt Raimond, the marshal, stood in the center of the room. His hands trembled as he buckled on his gun. There was a wild, taut, ashen look on his face and his lips were drawn.

Maybe Raimond was remembering that Art Camp had refused payment to Sonora yesterday, remembering that Camp had accused Sonora of cow killing and had cussed him out. Camp had been a good man. Newt Raimond, born and raised on these ranges, aimed to be a good man, too—even if he died for it.

"You going after them, Newt?" Inkspot inquired needlessly.

Raimond sucked in his breath. "Yes." He seemed to have trouble keeping his voice steady. "Y'see, Inkspot, I never had a thing to go on before. Now I have, an' these killers are right in my bailiwick. I—I sort of think they planned it this way. Maybe Sonora figgers to grab the law for himself."

Inkspot nodded heavily. Hell, as though he didn't know just how Newt felt! He watched Newt fumble shells into his gun. Denny Wade came in, said, "Inkspot, about that Camp setup? I—"

They weren't hearing him. Denny shut up and stood still.

"Doc Dell," Raimond said, "just told me he took a bullet out the fleshy part of Scorpion Snaith's left leg. We know, from

that Mex hand of Camp's, that was sleepin' in the barn, that three men rode up last night an' got to pourin' lead into Camp's shack after they put fire to it. One of them yelled he was hit, just before they cut Camp down."

"You know what it might mean," Inkspot warned. "Of course, nobody is really dead sure how this Sonora and his skunks will act in a stand-up fight. But there ain't much doubt."

"I know," Raimond muttered. "But, my God, Inkspot! I'm scared to death! Still, I got to do this. The law's got to mean somethin'. I'm yellow, I reckon."

Inkspot shook his head sadly. "We all got a little streak of yellow in us, I reckon," he said. "You know, Newt, yellow courage—a man being afraid, yet going against what he's afraid of—is sometimes the best. Newt, listen to me a bit. Maybe it'll quiet you down."

RAIMOND managed to roll a wobbly cigarette as he sank down in a chair. Denny Wade stood immobile, watching.

"You ever hear of a old-timer called Bat Hampshire?" Inkspot began.

Raimond, face crinkling, looked up. "Why, yeah. You bet. A goodish number of years ago, Bat Hampshire was just little red hell on skates. Folks used to talk about him a lot. He was famous and wasn't afraid of nothin', an' then suddenly he disappeared."

Inkspot watched a blue fly bat against the window. Outside, Hondo still remained a depressed, fear-filled zone of quiet.

"I been here five, six years now," Inkspot mused. "I knew Bat Hampshire a long time ago. I—Why I saw that last fight of his!"

Raimond showed interest. A bit of color was coming to his face. Inkspot noted this, shrewdly refrained from commenting, but ran on with his yarn.

"Bat Hampshire was smallish. Some like me. He come from the East some-

where. He seemed natural with guns, and he had a lot of dreams about civilizing the West. It was in Skull Flats, in Arizona, that Bat Hampshire become a officer. Nobody wanted the job, so when he asked for it, he got it. Well, he started cleaning up that hell-blown place.

"He done it, too—until that day when the Roamer gang got their friends and aimed to take the town away from Bat.

"It was hot that day, just like today. I was talking to some felows that knew Bat Hampshire. And I knew Bat Hampshire was afraid of the fight that was coming. He was scared all to hell. Yet he wore the badge, and he loved it. He aimed to go through. Kind of yellow courage, you see, Newt."

Raimond nodded. His fingers were pretty steady as he built and lighted another smoke. "That fight?" he said gently.

"Well, Skull Flats wasn't just one long street like Hondo. A lot of side streets and such made it up. Bat Hampshire warned people to get off the streets, cocked both sixguns, and went hunting the Roamers. He shot Bill Roamer on Main Street, got Tuck Salgren as he run out from behind the feed corral.

"The rest ganged up, and they all met in the middle of Main Street where it crossed Sundown Way. Six-to-one now. They come at each other, guns out and smoking. Dust fogged up, and the steady smashing of guns shook the town. Sweat

and blood ran off them. Three of the Roamers was down, another hit. And then Bat Hampshire was lying there in the dust and blood, his guns empty.

"The townsfolk woke up then. The three of the Roamer bunch that was left grabbed horses and ran. The folks picked Bat Hampshire up. He wasn't dead. They sent him to a hospital in Phoenix, telling him to come back when he got well." Inkspot sighed. "But he never did."

"Turned real yellow after that, I guess," Denny Wade put in.

"Well, I don't know," Inkspot deliberated. "There's more than one sort of this yellow courage. Skull Flats was well cleaned up. I've sometimes wondered if Bat Hampshire didn't show more courage by staying out of the town. You see, if he returned, there'd be lots of bad men who'd return, too—just to test Bat's gun skill. Maybe Bat had guts enough to let folks think him all yellow, just because he knew it would be more in the interests of peace."

Inkspot shook his head. "I don't know," he breathed.

Newt Raimond rose steadily. He was a tall man in his late thirties, steady now, but with that drawn look still on his face.

"I'm still scared," he grunted. "But it's not so bad now."

"Why in hell walk to your death?" Denny Wade demanded. "Get some folks to help you round them up."

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"Until that's needed, a man somehow can't," Raimond said. "I guess you wouldn't understand."

He straightened his shoulders and went out. Inkspot and Denny watched him go to the hotel, mount the steps and call out.

SCORPION limped out first, moved to the left. Fox Doak came next, and he stepped to the right. Sonora King filled the doorway then.

"I'm arrestin' you for killin' Art Camp," Raimond said, and his voice carried clearly up and down the street.

"Take us," Fox sneered.

His right hand moved. Bait, that, to get Raimond to reach for iron.

It worked. They let him smack the butt of his gun. They were fast, all three of them—deadly so. They gave Raimond first chance.

The sound that sinks men's stomachs and makes the blood pound in their ears, rolling, steady gunshot, echoed along the way. Sonora King, Fox, Scorpion—all three of them—beat the marshal to the draw. All three put bullets into him.

Raimond went backward, slid down the steps, rolled into the street. He hunched his shoulders, got his chest out of the dust, then fell flat. Hard enough so that puffs of that dust bellowed around him. He didn't move again.

Sonora King stepped forward. "You, with your heads stuck out of your holes," he bawled, "you saw him draw first. You better swear to that. And I'm on the notion you need a real law in this town. I might apply for the job."

He turned. The three went back into the hotel bar.

It was Inkspot who sent word to the county seat. Men cursing under their breaths, men damning themselves for being afraid, knowing they were no match for Sonora and those others, got the marshal up and carried him to Doc Dell's.

"Might be," the Doc said, "Newt will

live. But he'll never be the same again. What, in God's dear name, is this place coming to?"

No one might say. Throughout that day, Hondo was a heat-ridden, silent place. Toward evening a deputy sheriff came.

He held a court of inquiry in the hotel bar. A lot of men said they hadn't seen the fight. Others, quaking, damning Sonora, lied under Sonora King's pointed stares. They said Raimond had had no apparent legal reason to arrest these men, and had gone for his gun first.

The deputy wanted no fuss down here. Neither did his chief. They weren't forgetting how heavy the votes from this district had been against them last term.

"The marshal ain't dead. Can't see no reason to blame King." The deputy laid on the whitewash. "Get you a marshal that's got some sense and some gun-savvy, to boot."

"Getting away with it!" It was Inkspot Smith, shoving up to the fore. "Might be you will, King. My paper is only a dinky weekly. But if I raise enough hell, and see that copies get to Austin, may be the Governor will see some things. There's Rangers in this state."

King laughed. "You old fossil!" he rapped. "You print a line about me, and I'll take off those glasses of yours and beat hell out of you. You hear?"

Inkspot smiled quietly, unafraid, and headed for the door.

HE WENT back to his shop, lighted the hanging lamp above the typecases and went to work. Toward ten o'clock, Doc Dell and the mercantile, hotel, saloon and livery corral owners came to the shop.

"You ain't goin' to print no truck about that bunch?" the livery man wheezed. "You can't, Inkspot! Don't you know? King has come around to all of us—"

"You men are the city council. King come to you, telling you how to vote for

city marshal." Inkspot nodded. "I reckoned so. I'll be adding that to the story I'm setting up right now."

"He'll kill you," the hotel owner said. "He'll make it tough for all of us."

"It's pretty tough right now," Doc Dell muttered.

Inkspot's fingers, long for the size of him, supple, swift from years over a type case, moved on. The type slugs clicked in steady rhythm as they slipped into the stick he held.

The clicking sound cut off abruptly. Inkspot looked up. "I got an idea. Make me the marshal. Why not? If Sonora King tries to jump me for what I'm damned sure going to print, me being marshal might give him pause."

"He'll gun you, anyhow," someone protested.

"If he does, then that'll make two lawmen he's shot. He can't go on doing that forever. Don't you see? Even the sheriff will have to wake up to that. If he aims to shoot me, he will. Might be the badge would protect me some. And, shucks! Editors have been threatened before, you recollect."

"You're an old fool, Inkspot," Doc Dell grunted. "You never lug a gun, no more than the rest of us here. But you . . . Well, if you're going to print what you've got on King—and I know you will, you stubborn goat—your idea is some good. It makes me feel damned low-down to think you're the only one with fortitude enough to stand on your hind legs against a hellion like Sonora King."

"This was a growing, thriving, peaceful place until he came. Now he wants the town. As head of the Council, I call session here. And I nominate Inkspot Smith for city marshal."

"King'll rip 'er outa the rest of us," the livery man argued.

"Give me that badge," Inkspot growled. "When King sees my editorial in the morning, he won't be thinking of the rest

of you. And don't feel sorry for me, either. I ain't printing my own obituary."

"I'm afraid Denny Wade will be," Doc Dell sighed as he pinned the badge of office on the old editor's ink-daubed vest.

No use getting young Denny into this. All that night, Inkspot worked, finishing his editorial for the front page. His eyes squinted behind his glasses as he put the forms on the press. The little gasoline engine that ran the press chugged far toward daylight.

There was a tired droop to Inkspot's shoulders when the paper was out. The sun was coming up by the time he was done. But every dwelling, every building in town had a paper at the door. A Mexican he'd routed out of bed had ridden to deliver *The Globe* all over the range. And clippings of that editorial were tacked in places of prominence.

The rustling Sonora's tactics of "protecting" the ranchers at so much per head of cattle, the evidence against Sonora and his men in the shooting of Art Camp and in the shooting of Newt Raimond—all these things stood out in bold type. Nor did the editorial overlook Sonora King's aim to gobble the town as he had the range, and the sheriff's hands-off policy.

"But our City Council, brave as our citizens should be, has elected Inkspot Smith, your editor, as marshal," Inkspot wound up. "And as marshal, he hereby announces that Sonora King, Scorpion Snaith and Fox Doak are subject to arrest and confinement the instant they put foot inside this town."

HONDO exploded as to a charge of dynamite. Men gathered in little knots, papers in their hands. Streaks of dust started far out on the range and came trailing toward the town. Women stayed inside, calling cautiously from windows and doors.

Apprehensive glances kept flicking toward the south, the direction of Sonora

King's spread. And as each cloud of dust turned out to be some hurrying rancher, the town breathed with relief. An hour passed . . . Two . . . Three.

Men knocked on the door of the printing and newspaper office. They got no response. Inkspot was inside, in the little room at the rear. Denny Wade, wide-eyed, filled with fear, had knocked on the back door earlier.

"Go away, Denny," Inkspot had called. "Don't say where I am."

"You better hide farther away than this," Denny had warned.

Inkspot dragged a little calfskin trunk from under his rickety bed. He took a heavy shell belt out of that trunk, unwrapped two heavy guns.

He wriggled his hips, sagging the belt just so about him, until those guns hung low. The badge of city marshal was pinned on his inked vest.

Satisfied, he removed guns and badge. He bent his head. Outside, no footsteps sounded on the walk. The sound of voices had stopped suddenly. Inkspot's lips thinned, his heart hammered. He knew what had happened. Sonora and his dogs had come to town. Inkspot went up into the shop and unlocked the door. Then he sat down at his desk, waiting.

With a smash of angry footsteps, a shadow appeared in the doorway. A heavy hand gripped Inkspot's shoulder and flung him backward to the floor. Sonora King had come—in a black, murderous rage.

"I'll kill you!" he shouted. "I warned you about them things you wrote. Get up!"

He stooped, jerked Inkspot up, slapped his glasses off and smashed him to the floor. Inkspot lay there, dazed but still conscious. Sonora grabbed a typecase and turned it over, picked up a heavy form and sent it crashing.

"Marshal!" he roared. "Thought that would let you by with it, eh? By God, you've run up against the wrong man. In

one hour—one hour, you hear?—you'll get out a paper taking back all them things. Yes, and you'll tell folks you ain't marshal no more."

Inkspot climbed slowly to his feet, spitting blood. "You come here and assaulted an officer. You wrecked property. You've made threats. With what's already against you, the sheriff—yes, and the Governor—will have to back me up. You're under arrest, Sonora King."

King croaked, slung a fist to Inkspot's chin. Inkspot went down once more.

"You heard what I said," Sonora King howled. His voice rolled up and down the street for all to hear. "You slandered me, and now you threaten to gun me. A man's got the right to protect his name and his life, even against a marshal."

Sonora stormed away.

Inkspot got up. His bloody lips twisted wryly. He went back, got his guns and strapped them on again. He pinned on the badge.

"After all this, even if I die, folks are going to rise up against King and his kind," he thought aloud as he went slowly toward the door.

OUTSIDE, the sun was putting white, burning light onto the dust. Heat waves did devil dances in the street.

A low bumble of sound, like the buzz of bees, was all that disturbed the tomb-like quietude. Up and down the street, men were sitting sullenly, nursing a rising wrath. Inkspot Smith drew a great breath and softly cursed the pounding of his pulse as he turned slowly toward the hotel.

A few men gasped as they looked through doors and windows, and saw him. Where had Inkspot Smith, the mild little editor they had known these past years, gotten those two guns? What the hell did he figure he'd do with them?

Men like Doc Dell sighed, filled with regret, and fumbled for unused guns.

Down at the hotel, Fox Doak looked out, jerked his head back inside. "The old fool's comin' after us, Sonora!" he cried in disbelief.

Sonora drained a glass and smashed it on the floor. "A trick that won't work," he snarled. "They think he won't get it, eh? They're fools. We got reason to, and we'll prove it after that old goat's full of lead. Right out in the street, where they can all see. You two stick at my back."

There was an easy confidence in Sonora's way as he went out, down the steps and into the street. Fox and Scorpion fell in step a few yards back.

It was as though Hondo ceased to be a place of the living. Except for those four in the street, there wasn't a sign of humanity.

Sweat streamed down Inkspot's face as he went slowly on. His throat was dry. Perhaps he thought of that two-gun marshal, Bat Hampshire; perhaps he thought of meeting a fate worse than Bat Hampshire's had been.

Fifty yards . . . Then they were but twenty yards apart.

Sonora stopped. "You, old man!" he boomed. "You lied about me, and you was warned. You figure to arrest me now, but you ain't got nothing to go on."

Inches at a time, Inkspot came on. Twelve yards lay between them now.

"You assaulted me, wrecked my shop," Inkspot gave back, his voice almost too steady. "That's enough—even if you hadn't killed Camp and shot Newt."

Sonora King's face drew in a heavy frown. This fool showed no sign of fear, and he was still moving toward Sonora. Sonora saw the way those guns were worn. And a sudden wonder assailed him.

"Stop! Don't force me to kill you," he warned.

Inkspot Smith's breath hissed inward. "Draw 'er!" he spat.

His own hands, that had been limp at

his sides, came upward as his elbows crooked for the draw.

The two heavy guns came clear, flashing the light of the sun in a hellish, mocking way. Sonora's own guns were coming up and leveling when Inkspot's right-hand revolver spoke.

Sonora spun around, tripped, went down. Inkspot let that smoking gun keep right on talking, preaching a sermon of death, as he drove a bullet at Scorpion. Scorpion seemed to lift off his feet, and the thud of his body was sickening as he hit the ground.

Inkspot plunged forward, a numb, dead sensation possessing his right side and leg. He scooted on his stomach in a cloud of dust, right toward Sonora, who was struggling up. The dust kept Fox's second shot from getting him. Then Inkspot let the left pistol go. He fired twice, even as he slid along.

He came to a stop not a yard from Sonora King. There on his stomach, arms thrust ahead of him, guns roaring, Inkspot finished the battle. The right gun boomed. Sonora King's sickening bawl of fear, as he saw death unavoidable, was cut short on a gruesome, grunted note. He went sideways, his body jerking as Inkspot forwarded him to hell with still another shot.

Inkspot fixed his eyes on Fox then. Fox was bent double, holding splayed hands to his stomach. He walked toward the sidewalk, lurched over, came around in a little circle.

"Uh—ahhh!" It was a funereal, mournful sound that came bursting by lips that suddenly became crimson. He straightened, flung his hands toward that brassy copper sky, and then folded.

Inkspot Smith sat up, wincing against a blinding thrust of pain. He felt wilted, tired, empty inside. He watched men racing out toward him. Their mouths were open and they were yelling, but Inkspot

didn't seem to care so much. He was thinking: "Yeah, still so yellow it's a relief to have it over with."

DOC DELL had to fight his way to Inkspot. Everyone was trying to talk at once. Every man wanted to help carry Inkspot up to Doc's.

Inkspot was glad when he was in Doc's, and Doc was digging out the bullet that had torn a muscle and paralyzed his right leg. Denny came in, stood gawping at Inkspot Smith.

"Why didn't you tell us," Doc asked, "that you were so much hell with a gun? You been here these years—"

"Doc," Inkspot cut in, "sometimes—Easy, you horse doctor!—Sometimes it's easier to do what I done than *not* to. Ever hear me tell the story of Bat Hampshire? Remember, I said maybe it took more courage for Bat to stay away from Skull Flats, when he got well, than to go back? Bat loved the law, and knew it wouldn't be peaceful in Skull Flats if he went back to draw the notch-hunters there.

"All these years, it took courage to stay away, letting folks think he sneaked away, yellow—like me today. I wanted peace here. Me, I like law, too. It's in a man's blood, I guess. But this time, there ain't going to be any more yellow courage. I'm going to stick around in Hondo. You see?"

A large, long smile was on the doctor's

face. But Denny Wade, with other things on his mind, still didn't understand.

"This is a chance to print an extra, like the sheets in 'Paso and Santone do,'" he jabbered. "I looked in the shop. The forms of today's paper aren't hurt, and there's some big type left."

Inkspot blinked. His fingers touched the badge on his vest.

"All right. Have your extra," he decided. "It'll save me being bothered explaining a lot of things."

"What'll I say?" Denny almost whooped.

Inkspot raised his head from the table and looked at Denny.

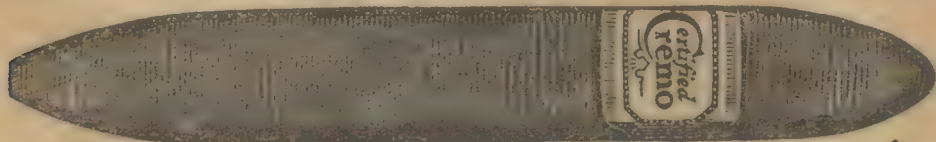
"Make a headline," he ordered, "that says 'Old time peace officer, Bat Hampshire, comes out of retirement and cleans up Hondo!'"

"Huh!" Denny exploded. "You mean—" he choked. "Why, you aren't yellow! You said—"

"Get!" the man on the table said. "You wouldn't know what a man was talking about."

But Doc Dell knew. "Yellow courage," he muttered. "You know, I sometimes think that yellow is the best color that is. It takes the finest kind of strength to go against fear and—"

"Don't give me no sermon, Doc," Inkspot—or Bat Hampshire—growled. "Get done with your fixing and give me a drink. Can't you see how I'm shaking? I'll be scared for a week after this."



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THE GUNMAN WHO DIED TWICE



The forms of Santos' men were vague shadows in the alleyway. A lance of flame leaped out.

By JOHN G. PEARSON

(Author of "A Coward Guards the Pass," etc.)

Doc Price's job on the Brazos Kid had only started when he'd dug the bullets out. . . . He tried a new prescription—one part of Kindness and two parts of Faith—to make an honest man of a gun-deadly bank robber. . . . And it seemed to work till the Kid himself spoiled the formula—with six parts of smoking lead!

THE Brazos Kid was on his last legs. He was bloody and weak and gaunt. The bullets in him burned like fire, and the weight of them seemed to press him down. He swayed in the saddle. His belly was gaunt with hunger, his belt tightened to its last notch. His tight-pressed lips made a pale slash from sunken cheek to sunken cheek.

He stopped his staggering bronc atop a rise and looked back along the way he had come. The tiny dust clouds told him the posse was drawing closer. He looked along the trail ahead, and saw the glint of a rifle barrel at the pass in the mountains. The Brazos Kid was trapped. His short and hectic career was about to end.

Three days ago the Brazos Kid had attempted his last bank robbery. Even then he had known it would be his last. He had known the country was too hot to hold him. That stick-up had been a last desperate attempt to get money with which to clear out of the country, to make his way to Mexico, to South America.

But the Brazos Kid knew now he'd never reach Mexico. One hour, two at the most, and the Brazos Kid would be history, raw, savage, bloody history. He prodded his mount and rode on toward the mountain pass. A bloody froth was at the corners of his horse's mouth. Its gait was a shuffling, shambling walk. The horse was about done.

The Kid knew that he was cornered. The world was a whirling thing in front of his eyes. When his horse fell, it would be the finish. He had no ammunition. He'd exhausted it in that first mad fight to escape the posse ring that had closed so inexorably about him.

As he rode on, weakened, swaying, the Kid kept telling himself he wouldn't stop, he wouldn't sit down and rest and let them come up to him. Anybody else might have done that. But the Kid wouldn't. He couldn't. He knew that. Maybe it was the fierceness, the savagery within him,

that made him know he would never stop till he was dead. All he wanted was a gun in his hand, so that he could back up against a wall and face them with a smile on his lips—and give them hell while they killed him. All the Kid knew how to do, all he had ever known, was to fight and take what he wanted, to kill till he was killed.

The click of steel on stone came to the Kid's ears, and he guessed that a posseman had circled him, heading him off. The Kid took his gun from his holster and held it in his hand. That was a futile gesture. He knew the gun was empty, but it seemed that it belonged in his hand when the Brazos Kid was about to die. . . .

A horseman came around the trail, stopped to stare at the bloody apparition the Kid presented. The Kid kept on. He could hardly see the rider. The man was just a vague shape, tall and thin, with white hair and a big floppy black hat.

The Kid raised his gun in his shaky hand and tried to make a pretense of a fight. He tried to thumb back the hammer on his empty gun, but his thumb seemed to be paralyzed. He tried to focus his dimming eyes on that dancing form on the trail. He waited for the shot that should come when that other man saw him raising his gun. But there wasn't any shot.

The Kid felt a sharp sensation of disappointment as he realized that his horse had stumbled, was falling; that he, himself, was falling and couldn't help himself. A hell of a note it was for the Brazos Kid to die without the crashing beat of guns in his ears, without the smell of smoke in his nose! Falling off his horse like a fool!

The Brazos Kid hit the ground with a hard smash. A sharp stone tore at his face as he crashed down a steep slope, and warm blood flowed out to cover his neck. His head struck a rock. A million bright lights exploded in the Kid's eyes. Deep, dark oblivion swept upon him, like a blanket. He tried to fight it off, tried to climb

his way back to consciousness. But he couldn't do it. Oblivion was something the Brazos Kid could not fight. . . .

GRADUALLY, as though emerging from the darkness of night through the dirty gray of dawn and on into the brightness of day, the Brazos Kid came back to consciousness. Slowly, wearily, he opened his eyes and looked about him. He was in a room, and the smell of disinfectants was in the air. He was swathed in bandages. He was stiff and sore, and so weak he didn't bother to turn his head. He just switched his eyes curiously about.

There was a white stand and a table with a lot of instruments on it, and a cabinet with bottles in it. The Kid guessed he was either in a hospital or a doctor's office. He closed his eyes again and listened to the drone of voices that came to him through a half-closed door. The voices sounded dim and distant and unreal to the Kid, but as his head gradually cleared they became more distinct. Finally he could hear the words.

"It's crazy," said a heavy, booming voice, "and I won't do it. Every sheriff in the state would give his right arm to snare the Brazos Kid, and I think this is him, right in my hands, and you ask me to let him loose."

The Kid sort of jerked to attention at that.

"I don't ask you to let the Brazos Kid loose," said another voice. "I ask you to let me try an experiment. I'm not sure he's the Brazos Kid. But I'm positive he's lost his memory, and that it was caused by a blow on his head when he struck the rocks. To take a man who remembers nothing of his past, and lock him up for things he did before that happened, would be like locking up a man who had really done nothing."

"But the Brazos Kid did a hell of a lot," said the deep voice. "He—"

"But he doesn't know it. I asked him

who he was, when he was conscious for a moment, and he shook his head. He looked at me dazedly. He doesn't know who he is. He doesn't know he ever did a wrong. Leave him with me, and I'll make a new man of him. He'll be what I teach him to be. Men are not born criminals, but made so by circumstances, and from now on this one will be what he learns to be. He'll have no criminal inclinations. He'll start over again, just as though he'd been born again."

"If he's the Kid, he'll run like a wolf the minute he's able," scoffed the heavy voice. "He's a killer, and a killer has to pay for the lives he's taken."

"Why would he run?" asked the other. "He won't know he has anything to run from. He'll wonder who he was and what he was, and I'll tell him I don't know. By example, I'll show him what I am and what you are and what other honest, respectable folks are. I'll prove to you that I'm right; that even the Brazos Kid would have been decent if he'd had a chance."

There was a long silence. The Kid wondered what the hell this was all about. Who was the light-voiced gent who thought criminals were made, not born? Whoever he was, he was loco as hell. And who was the other gent? A sheriff probably, by the way he talked. The Kid's lips curled contemptuously. The Kid had always hated sheriffs. . . .

"YOU'RE sure nobody suspects who who he is but you and me?" asked the sheriff.

"I'm positive," said the other. "I found him out there, alone. He tried to shoot me with an empty gun. He fell and his horse was smashed on the rocks in the canyon. Nobody will ever find it. He fell down the cliff and landed on a shelf. I climbed down and brought him back up. I met no one on the way here, and I can say he wandered in last night. I'll give him a name that will keep folks from thinking

things. Even if he is the Brazos Kid, it's hardly likely that he'll be recognized, with that scar on his face."

"You go in and wake him up," said the sheriff. "You prove to me he's lost his memory, and I'll give it a whirl. Just because you've saved most everybody's life here, Doc, I'll try it for a while. I wouldn't do it for any other man on earth. I'll probably lose my job because of it, but—"

"You'll lose nothing," said the one who had been called Doc. "Come on."

The Brazos Kid closed his eyes. He heard steps. He felt a man's fingers on his wrist, trying his pulse.

"He's on the verge of awakening now," said the doctor. "His pulse is quickening. Get behind me, so he won't see you."

The Kid, lying very still, had a hard time keeping the grin off his face. This was the best yet! A sheriff who wasn't sure who the Kid was, and a crazy doctor who thought all men were good! All the Kid had to do, till he was strong enough to make a clean getaway, would be to pretend he knew nothing about his past.

The doctor's voice came again. "Wake up. It's time for some medicine."

The doctor kept on talking, but the Kid took his time. He finally opened his eyes and stared stupidly up at an old, white-haired gent, who smiled down at him. This was the old jasper he'd tried to shoot with an empty gun out on the trail. The Kid placed him now.

"It's time for your medicine," said the doctor.

"Medicine?" asked the Kid weakly, puzzlement in his voice.

"I found you out on the trail," the doctor said. "You were hurt. I brought you here and fixed you up. My name is Doctor Price. What is yours?"

The Kid stared blankly up at that face above him. He put all the puzzlement into his eyes that he could. In fact, he was really puzzled a bit. He didn't remember this doctor gent asking him who he was

before, or remember shaking his head. But maybe he had.

"Funny," said the Kid finally, as he raised a weak hand and brushed it across his eyes. "I don't seem to remember. I don't seem to remember anything."

THE Kid knew he'd made it stick. Doc Price smiled, gave the Kid a pill, then told him to go to sleep. The Kid closed his eyes obediently. He heard the footsteps leave the little room. He heard Doc and the sheriff talking again; but they kept their voices low now, and the Kid couldn't hear the words.

The Kid didn't give a damn now what they said. He was set, here, safe as hell, long enough to get well. The Kid wanted to laugh at that. The sheriff must think a hell of a lot of this Doc to agree to that. The Kid remembered the sheriff saying Doc had saved most everybody's life here, and the Kid guessed a doctor could be looked on as sort of a hero, at that. But to the Kid, doctors were just like anybody else. They had their uses, to dig bullets out of a gent when he was shot up. This Doc Price had his use now. He'd fix up the Kid. His fool idea, that every man would be honest if he had a chance, would give the Kid an opportunity to get on his feet. The Kid would fool Doc Price. And he'd fool the sheriff. Not all killers would pay for the lives they had taken. The Brazos Kid wouldn't pay for the men he had killed. . . .

The Kid went to sleep again. When he awoke, there was an old lady beside him. She smiled at him, sort of like Doc Price had smiled.

"How do you feel now, my son?" she asked him.

"I feel pretty good," said the kid.

Then he wondered why he lied, because he didn't feel good. He felt like hell. He was still weak as a cat. He felt as if he could lie here the rest of his life. But the old lady seemed pleased to hear that he

felt good; and the Kid had never had anybody call him 'my son' before, so the Kid let it stand the way he'd first said it.

The Kid had to stay in bed and the old lady brought him his meals. He ate them absently, his mind filled with what he'd do when he'd be able to be up. He'd cache a couple guns and some ammunition; he'd spot a fast horse; he'd manage to get some money. Then, sometime when the sheriff was out of town, he'd make a run for it. He'd have to do it pretty quick, before the sheriff got a reward notice with his picture on it.

But after a week had passed, the Kid began to wonder how long it would take to get him on his legs again. He was still shaky. Two weeks, and he was barely able to stagger across the room to look at himself in a mirror that hung on the wall. He'd wanted to do that ever since Doc Price had said he'd probably not be recognized because of the scar on his face.

The Kid stood there and looked a long time at himself. Folks who had ever known the Brazos Kid would still know him now, because the scar wasn't much. Anyone could see the resemblance from a reward poster. It wasn't the scar that bothered the Brazos Kid. It was the thin, pale, emaciated face that looked back at him—eyes sunken back in his head, cheek bones that protruded out over his sunken cheeks.

The Brazos Kid guessed he must have been in a pretty bad shape when Doc picked him up. He went back to bed and started to count the bullet holes in him. There were eight. Eight wounds and a slashed face and a smash on the skull! Old Doc Price hadn't had much to work on when he'd lugged the Kid in and started to patch him up. No wonder it was taking a long time to get on his feet again.

Another week, and the Kid grew a little stronger. Doc tended to his wounds every day. Once Doc told him he'd have to have a name. Folks would want to know who

he was. The Kid didn't know any names except John Smith or Bill Brown—and every time you said one of those names, folks grinned a little, like they knew it wasn't a real name.

"How about John Williams?" Doc asked.

"I guess that's as good as any," said the Kid.

"And you can be from Pecos," Doc added.

The Kid shrugged. Whatever Doc said was all right with him.

THE Kid fretted as he grew stronger, counting the weeks he'd been here. He knew it wouldn't take that bonehead of a sheriff very much longer to get reward notices of the Brazos Kid, and to be able to identify him positively. And when he did that, the Kid would go to jail, Doc Price or no Doc Price.

The Kid gritted his teeth and dressed and walked down the street. But his legs trembled and cold sweat popped out on him as he moved slowly along, a skinny, emaciated young gent whom everybody studied curiously. He sat down on a board bench that ran the length of a saloon front. He had to sit down. His heart was hammering furiously. His hands were trembling. His vision was uncertain. He was in a hell of a fix.

As he sat there and looked out at this little town of Banco, there was a light of desperation in his eyes. This was just the same as being in jail. Too weak to make a run for it. No guns. No horse. No money. . . .

The Kid looked the town over, and knew it was a tough one. He watched the men who went in and out of the saloon. Many of them had the swagger of gunmen. A man came out of the saloon and stood at the door. He looked at the Kid, with a faint smile on his thin, dark face. The Kid looked up—and he knew then that he was sunk, unless he played

his cards very close to the belly.

This dark-faced gent was Jim Santos, a halfbreed gunman the Kid had known for a long time. Jim Santos was the kind of gunman who made his money safely; the kind of gent who shot his men in the back if he could. The law never had anything on Santos. But he was crooked as a snake. Santos wouldn't hesitate a minute to collect the couple thousand dollars that the law had put on the Brazos Kid's head.

The Kid looked away from Santos, as though he didn't recognize him. But he knew that Santos was still grinning at him.

"I'd never expect the Brazos Kid to come, bold as hell, right into a town and stay there, even if he was all shot up," said Santos.

The Kid looked up. "I think you got the wrong number, mister," the Kid said. "My name is John Williams. Or maybe you wasn't talking to me."

"Yes, I was talking to you. And one name or another, it's all the same," said Santos. "I wouldn't expect John Williams to come to town and stay, either."

The Kid didn't reply. There was no use saying anything. Santos knew him. The Brazos Kid was the Brazos Kid. Nothing would ever change that. Santos eased down on the bench beside the Kid.

"I've sort of been waiting for someone like John Williams to come along," Santos said. "I need someone with some brains in the tips of his fingers, like this Brazos Kid I used to know. The Kid could put his fingers on the knob of a bank safe and put his ear to the steel of the door, and listen to it tick for a while, then swing the door open. Now if John Williams could do that, I'd have a proposition for him."

The Kid sat there, dully thinking of the length of time he'd been in Banco. In a few days now the sheriff would have his reward dodger. He'd have a picture of the Brazos Kid.

"What is the proposition?" asked the Brazos Kid.

"Tomorrow night," said Santos, "somebody that could work a safe combination might meet some fellows in back of this saloon about midnight. Then they'd go to the bank and open it up. They'd make an even split, and it'd be morning before anybody knew what had happened."

Bank safes were the Kid's specialty. In the last one, someone had spotted him going in. There'd been a ring of rifles around the bank when he'd tried to come out. But in this, with some gents outside to give warning if they were spotted, or help to fight off the law if they were chased, maybe the Kid could make it. If it worked, he'd have a half day start. If it didn't work, he'd be no worse off than he would if Santos turned him over to the law.

"Have a pair of extra guns and a fast horse for me," said the Brazos Kid. "I'll be there."

THE Kid rose and went back up the street. The sweat popped out on him again. His heart pounded a little, but he made it to the Price's place and flopped on the bed to rest. He wondered if he'd be strong enough to make a ride tomorrow night. But he knew he'd have to make it. Santos had him in a spot. It was either work with Santos, or Santos would start to talk about a gent named the Brazos Kid being in town. Then the Brazos Kid would be in jail. The sheriff would have to jail him, whether he wanted to or not. That thing they called public opinion would make him do it.

Evening came, and Doc Price's wife, Martha, brought supper to the Kid's bed.

"You should take it easy," she told the Kid. "I saw you out walking today. There's no hurry for you to get well. You're welcome here, and when you get well the doctor has made arrangements for you to get a job here. Would you like that?"

The Kid nodded. "Uh huh," he said. "I'd like that fine."

The old lady went out, and Doc came in after a while. He examined the Kid again and made him take some medicine.

"You'll be on your feet very soon, my boy," he said. "You're doing fine."

The Brazos Kid thought he was doing pretty well himself. Tomorrow night he'd have a pair of guns, a fast horse and a pocket full of money. After being damn near dead, that would be doing swell.

All next day the Kid rested. He watched the sun sink low. He ate his supper and listened to old Doc get ready for bed. The night grew quiet. The lights went out in the street.

The Kid eased out of bed and dressed. He made his way slowly down the alley to the back of the saloon. Santos and three other men were there. They went on down the alley, and Santos put a key in the lock of the back door of the bank. The door opened. Santos went in with the Kid, while the three others stayed outside.

The Kid put his ear to the safe door. His long, slender fingers started to turn the knob. He listened to the tumblers fall inside the great steel door. This was a game the Kid liked. This and gun-fighting were all he knew. He had to grin when he remembered the old lady saying Doc had made arrangements for him to get a job. Doc Price was optimistic as hell. Doc figured he could make the sheriff lay off, even if it did turn out that John Williams was the Brazos Kid. But the Kid had no such illusions. He knew what he was up against.

The safe door swung open. Santos chuckled as he pulled stacks of bills out of the safe. He stuffed the money in a canvas sack, and the Kid followed him out to the back door.

The forms of Santos' three men were vague shadows in the alleyway. A lance of flame leaped out of the darkness. A

giant sledge seemed to strike the Kid on the head. Dimly, dazedly, while a gun roared in his ears, the Kid fell backward. In that instant before he dropped into oblivion he wondered if Santos had double-crossed him, or if that shot had come from the gun of a lawman. . . .

THE Brazos Kid opened his eyes and looked about him. This time there was no mistake about it. He was in jail. The bars were up there at the window. The deep clank of bootheels sounded in the corridor, and the sheriff stopped at the door and looked in. Doc Price was with the sheriff.

"You can have fifteen minutes with him, Doc," said the lawman.

The Sheriff went away again, and the doctor peered in at the Kid.

"They found you shot at the back door of the bank," Doc Price told the kid. "You were creased in the head. They think you helped to rob the bank and that your pardners shot you."

Doctor Price waited as though he wanted the Kid to deny that. But the Kid was too busy thinking about Santos to deny anything. Santos had used him, then shot him. Santos had left him for dead.

"The sheriff got a reward poster for the Brazos Kid last night, and it shows your picture," Doc went on. "I've tried to argue him out of jailing you. I've tried to tell him that you are not responsible now for the things you did before you were hurt. You lost your memory and didn't know who you were. Somebody took advantage of the fact that you were the Brazos Kid, lured you to the back of the bank, and used your name to frame this bank robbery on you. I've tried to tell the sheriff that's the way it happened. But it's no use. He's going to keep you in jail. He thinks you robbed the bank. You didn't, did you?"

The Kid didn't bother to turn his head. He kept thinking about Jim Santos, the

dirty double-crosser. He had to figure out a way to get Jim Santos.

"Yeah, I robbed the bank," the Kid admitted tiredly. He might as well get this over with. "I didn't lose my memory. After I heard you and the John Law talking, I pretended I'd lost it. You're kind of crazy, with your reform ideas, Doc."

The Kid expected the doctor to curse him and walk away. But the doctor just stood there and kept looking at the Kid.

"All my life," Doc said softly, "I've tried to do all I could for humanity. When there was no money, it made no difference. All my life I've lived to help people. Maybe I've been a fool, but I had a special reason for being a fool about you."

Doc stopped, and the Kid wondered at that whimsical smile that touched his lips.

"It just happens," Doc went on, "that your name is really John Williams. Your father was Benjamin Williams, and he was from Pecos. He was Martha's, my wife's, brother, and he was a victim of circumstances that drove him into outlawry. He had to leave and take you with him. We did not hear from him for several years.

"Finally he staggered into my office, wounded and hungry, and told us he had left you down on the Border with a man called Tumbler Dawson. He said some outlaw had nicknamed you the Brazos Kid and that he had never told you your right name. He begged me to find you and raise you, to save you from the mistake he had made. He died, and I buried him here in Banco. I buried him as Benjamin Williams, and no one here knows that he was an outlaw.

"I tried to find you. I hunted Tumbler Dawson, but could not find him. I saw pictures of the Brazos Kid and recognized the striking likeness between you and your father. Then when I found you out on the trail and thought you had lost your memory, I figured that would be my chance to bring you back to decency. I

was firm in my belief that all men would be honest if they had a chance. I knew that Ben Williams would have been honest if he had had a chance.

"Most of the men who come to me at night, and stick a gun in my belly to make me go to doctor their wounded outlaw comrades, are surprised when I prove to them that I don't have to be forced to administer to the sick and wounded. They are surprised when I accept only my usual fee of two dollars instead of the roll of bills they sometimes offer me in their gratitude. They are disillusioned men who think that all hands are against them. But that is where they are wrong. For most all men want to help others."

The doctor stopped, and the Kid lay there, thinking of the night his father had ridden away and not come back. That was the only thing he did remember about his father. He didn't remember his name. But the Kid did remember Tumbler Dawson, who had taught him how to listen to the tumblers fall inside the door of a safe.

"But robbing the bank spoiled it," Doc went on. "If necessary, I'd have gone to the Governor of the State to keep you out of jail. I'd have done anything to convince Martha that her brother's son was on the right road at last. But, as you say, I guess I've been a fool. Robbing the bank has proved it. You've taken the money out of the pockets of hard working men. You've taken the savings that Martha and I have worked for for thirty years, to keep up in our old age. You've taken the bread out of the mouths of hungry children. Maybe you never thought of it that way. But that's it. And now all you can do is be sorry. I hope you are sorry, because that would be the first turning point to a new life."

"Your time's up, Doc," called the sheriff. "I hate to see you standing there, trying to do something with a gent of that caliber. It's too much like tryin' to reform a snake."

"I'm coming," called old Doc Price.

Then he moved away, walking tiredly, his shoulders bowed a little, as though he was beginning to realize that his old theory of all men being good wasn't worth a damn. . . .

THE Kid lay there on the cot, thinking, as the jail quieted. John Williams was really his name. The white-haired old lady was his aunt. Doc would have gone to the governor, if necessary, to keep him out of jail—if he had played straight. The bank was broke, and the savings that Martha and Doc had counted on were gone. Kids would be hungry. . . . he had never thought about it in that light.

Now that he did think about it, the Kid could savvy that hungry business. He'd been hungry plenty of times. He could understand being hungry, but he couldn't understand the funny feeling that was coming over him. Why should he be sorry he'd helped rob a bank? He was sorry, he told himself, but mostly because he'd let Santos make a sucker out of him.

The sheriff came down the corridor with a plate of grub in his hands. He slid it through the slit in the cell door.

"Doc's wife sent it," he said. "It ought to choke you."

The Kid looked at the plate of food, then eyed the guns that hung at the sheriff's hips. He lay still and made no move to get up from his cot.

"I'm pretty sick," he told the sheriff. "How about bringin' the grub over to me?"

The sheriff eyed the Kid suspiciously for a second. The Kid did look sick. He was skinny and pale and had fresh blood on his head. The sheriff unlocked the door and brought the plate inside. He started to set it down, where the Kid could reach it.

The Kid brought his knee up against the side of the lawman's face. The plate clattered to the floor, and the sheriff rolled

over against the wall. The kid leaped after him and swooped up one of the sheriff's guns, then lay there on the floor and pointed the gun at the lawman. He was grinning, thinking of Santos. Now, with a gun in his fist, the Kid would collect from Santos. He'd make Santos sorry.

"Go ahead and shoot," said the sheriff.

But the Kid just grinned. He got up and tied the lawman's hands behind him with a strip of shirt. He gagged him. He took the sheriff's gun belt and swung it about his own waist. Then he went out, locking the cell door behind him.

He grinned a little as he stepped out into the early dusk of the street. The grin gave his bony face a wolfish cast. He weaved some as he went down toward the saloon. He looked at the sign over the door and was surprised that he read: "Jim Santos' Bar."

So Jim Santos was a business man. He wouldn't be a business man very long. Remembering the back door of the saloon, where Santos had met him, the Kid went around to the back. The Kid opened the door. He looked into a room where an oil lamp showed Jim Santos at a desk. There was a big safe in the corner of the room.

Santos glanced up, into the muzzle of the Kid's gun.

"H're yuh, Jim?" said the Kid mockingly. "I dropped in for my split of the bank money."

Santos seemed frozen there in the chair. His swarthy face was gray. The Kid grinned at him, motioned with his gun toward the big safe in the corner.

"Open it, Santos," he said.

Santos hesitated, then went over and swung the big door open. The Kid backed him away, then reached in and got the canvas sack that Santos had had last night.

"I didn't think you'd split it up yet," he said to Santos. "I guessed you'd figure it would be best to keep it hid for a while."

The Kid held the sack in his left hand and his gun in his right. His legs were

beginning to shake again. He was getting tired as hell. But his fixed, mirthless grin warned Santos as he stepped backward toward the door.

The Kid backed into the door jamb, and his gun wavered a little. Santos saw his chance. He yelled and leaped sideways as he tried to draw. The Kid's gun slammed once. And Santos sprawled out on the floor, as if he'd been flattened with a club.

The noise out front in the saloon stopped suddenly as the Kid's gun boomed. The Kid went out the door. A yell sounded from the front door of the office. A gun whammed at him as he stumbled in the darkness. A regular fusillade of shots was searching for him then.

He weaved down the alley. He cut back toward the street, and there were men at its end, guns in their hands, coming toward him. There were gunmen behind him and gunmen in front of him. The Kid stumbled again, and a shot came from one of those gunmen at the end of the alley.

The Kid kept on. He slammed a couple of shots up the alley and saw two men go down. He grinned as the alley cleared. He'd had them outlined against the light of the street, while he was in darkness.

But he couldn't stay in the alley forever. In fact, he couldn't stay anywhere very long. His legs were too wobbly. His heart was pumping too fast. He kept on, marching toward the street. He tied the sack to his belt, so he could use his other gun.

HE PLOWED ahead. Down the street horses were tied in front of the saloon. He could go that way and get a horse and try for a getaway, or he could go up the other way—and be a damn fool. He did the crazy thing of going up toward the sheriff's office, where the last couple of gunmen were. It was crazy, because once up there he'd never get back. But through the blare of guns and the whisper of the

lead, the Kid seemed to hear the soft, tired voice of old Doc Price, the gent who had done all he could do for humanity, who had been a fool, but had had a special reason for being a fool over him.

The Kid could see the last two gunmen now. The street was lighter than the alley had been, and those two ominous shapes loomed up clearly there ahead of him. He stumbled along with the shambling gait of a half-dead man.

Hungry children and old folks without security kept popping into his mind as he grinned that wolfish grin and slammed bullets at those last two shapes ahead of him. He stumbled, almost fell. This, he knew, was the craziest thing the Brazos Kid had ever done—getting killed taking money *back* to somebody.

He was getting killed, right now. He'd die, and old Doc Price would bury him and put 'John Williams, son of Ben Williams,' on his headstone. Doc would do that to please Martha. And Doc Price would arrange it, some way, that nobody would know John Williams was the Brazos Kid, so Martha would be able to tend the graves without being talked about. Doc was that kind of a fellow. . . .

The Kid shambled on. He shot at a shadow and it dropped. He shot at another one and it melted down into the sand of the street. Then all of a sudden the street was awfully quiet. There were no more shots, no more shadows, no more movement anywhere. The Kid was all alone, a weaving, wobbly, blood-covered gargoyle, standing in a little patch of yellow light.

Then old Doc came hurrying down the street, his black bag in his hand. The Kid saw him and grinned. Doc was running to help somebody. The Kid saw the sheriff, freed probably by someone who had gone to call him when the shooting had started. A bunch of people were coming from everywhere.

Doc stopped and stared at the Kid. The

Kid was untying the money sack at his belt. The sheriff stopped, staring, and the Kid tossed the money sack at his feet. He let his guns slip off the end of his fingers, because he couldn't hold them any longer. The Kid straightened up and tried to talk.

"There you are," he tried to say. "Now the kids won't go hungry and the old folks be cheated out of their savings. And Martha Price can know that Ben Williams' son is on the right path at last."

But the Kid didn't say a word. He was too far gone. He just made a gesture of finality as he crumpled down in the dust.

Old Doc Price's face was a spinning blur above him. The Doc was saying something about this not being the Brazos Kid — but John Williams, Martha's nephew. And the sheriff's voice was a vague, indistinct thing, agreeing with him.

"He wasn't the Brazos Kid at all," the Kid heard the sheriff harangue, and knew he was saying that only because he didn't want Doc Price shamed.

Then everything started to fade and the voices grew dim. The Kid knew he'd be

dead in a couple of minutes. He wasn't sorry he was dying. Somehow, he was glad, because Martha and old Doc would have their money back and the kids wouldn't go hungry.

That was a hell of a funny way for a man to feel as he was passing out! Glad because somebody else was getting something! The Kid couldn't quite understand why he should feel that way. He searched around in his dazed mind for something to combat this new and startling force that had come over him. Then he remembered about the marker he knew they'd put on his grave: "John Williams, from Pecos." Every sheriff in the country, except this one, would still be looking for the Brazos Kid—and he'd be dead and buried as an honest man. That would be a good joke. The Kid grinned a little at the thought.

But, strangely, the hard-boiled Brazos Kid couldn't get as much kick out of that as he could out of thinking about the hungry kids and the old folks. Maybe there *was* something to those crazy theories of old Doc Price's. It was kind of swell to die decent, at that. . . .



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RANGELAND
ROMANCES

A Man for the Bad.



Bullock's revolver opened up on the fighting men. He was shooting to kill them both.

By WALT COBURN

(Author of "Gun-Hire for Hunted Men," etc.)

From across the Missouri River, Fort Musselshell's muted bugle calls filtered into the untamed badlands. . . . Reveille's distant note welcomed Scott Morgan to the hanged remains of his renegade father. And it was Taps, the call of death, that sounded as he rode along to spring a brass-buttoned horse-thief's murder trap!

“WHERE you cross the Missouri River twice to get on the other side.” . . . That was how the long, narrow, U-shaped bend of the river

that twists its way through the Montana badlands had been described to Scott Morgan. The country is rough. A man could hide out there for years, living off

lands Night-Guard



An epic novelette of frontier courage in the Montana badlands—by the famous cowboy author

the wild game, and never be sighted unless he grew careless.

On the south side of the river, at the outside tip of the fingertip bend, was Fort Musselshell. Scott Morgan had been warned about swinging around Fort Musselshell. His crossing was

marked on a crude, roughly sketched but accurate map that routed his way through the badlands.

Last night he'd made a dark-camp so near the fort that his sharp, trained ears had caught the haunting, silver-noted "taps" of the cavalry bugle, echoing to

thin, whispering silence in the badlands. The sound of it had been like the twist of a dull, rusty knife blade in his heart. In an older man the sensation that had gone over him like a shudder might have been that of bitterness and hatred. But Scott Morgan, twenty-five and game-hearted, had felt only a dull pain like homesickness or lonesomeness. Then he'd fought it off, grinned at the stars, and staked out his horse where the grass grew hock-high under the scrub pines.

He hadn't dared risk lighting a fire. Scouts from the fort might have sighted it and investigated. This was Sioux country, and army orders were to watch for renegade war parties. But jerked venison needs no fire, and a June night in Montana requires no campfire's warmth. Scott Morgan had been content enough to chew dry jerky in the starlight, thankful that his hide was whole; that he had ammunition for his guns and a stout horse to ride—and that tomorrow night he would meet his father again after a five year separation.

Scott Morgan was in the saddle before dawn. There was a streak of gray in the east when he loosened his saddle cinch and rode into the wide river. He heard a wolf howl. The water rose to the level of his stirrups, wet his saddle skirts. . . . A brief, strong swim across the swift current in the channel, and he landed on the far side, a hundred yards downstream, on a sandbar that sloped up to the thick screen of red willows.

He rode into the brush before he dismounted to pull on his boots, which he'd carried around his neck. His horse was a proven water horse and swam high, so that Scott Morgan had made the crossing without wetting his guns, which he'd kept clear of the water, belt and six-shooter hung around his neck, carbine slung across his back and shoulders. He gained the shelter of the brush as quickly as possible. Like a wild, hunted animal,

he had a dread of open places—where he'd make a fair target.

SCOTT MORGAN was now in the long, narrow bend. If he kept due east, he would be forced to swim the river again, crossing the river twice to get on the other side. And if he should have made the second crossing, he would still be on the south side of the wide Missouri, having simply cut across the hairpin bend instead of following the river's course.

But Scott Morgan's instructions, that had come with the rough map, had been to go no farther than this bend. He'd find a log cabin and barn and a round pole corral here in the bend among the cottonwoods. It was at the corral that Scott Morgan's father, Tom Morgan, was to meet him.

"God, the U.S. Cavalry, and the Vigilantes of Montana Territory willing or outwitted, as the case may be," Tom Morgan had written in his brief, bitter, yet swashbuckling and gaily defiant letter, "I'll meet you there. I ask of you only this—that before you commence shooting hear what it is I have to say."

Scott Morgan had that letter in the pocket of his weather-scarred, unfringed buckskin shirt. He'd kept it dry, guarding it as he might have looked after some valued treasure, in a buckskin pouch which held a plain gold wedding ring that had belonged to his mother, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen on earth or in his dreams.

This was the bend in the river, the cotton-woods Tom Morgan had described with that gift of his of painting pictures with words. The giant cottonwoods, as the letter had worded it, reached with leafy arms towards the heaven. There was the faint odor of wild roses in bloom, and the smell of driftwood in the muddy river as it gnawed at the shore's clay banks. There was the fading howl of a wolf, the muttering of the water as it chuckled

over some drowned secret that concerned men and gold and bloodshed on the frontier of a new land that white men were taking by force from the Indians.

Scott Morgan saw the place in the first uncertain gray light of dawn, just as that strange man who was his father had painted it with words. Alone now in this badlands country that had hidden the renegade Tom Morgan for five years, Tom Morgan's son found it hard to keep alive in his heart the fire of hatred for the man who had killed the most beautiful woman in the world or beyond this world. And yet, as he rode into the small clearing in the cottonwoods, Scott Morgan's hand was on his gun. The strange rendezvous was for tonight, not in this early dawn. Scott Morgan had come early.

Because the light was dim, he had ridden almost up to the corral before he saw the thing that frightened his big roan horse. It hung motionless from the high ridgepole that connected the tall posts of the open corral gate. . . . The body of a hanged man!

Even before he spurred his big roan close enough to make identity certain, Scott knew that the hanged man was his father. Tom Morgan had come to this place to meet his son, to say what he had wished to say before that only son passed his final bitter judgment. Tom Morgan's enemies had trapped him here. Tom Morgan had kept his long delayed rendezvous with Death.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Hero's Saddlemate

SCOTT MORGAN cut down the hanged body of his father—a grisly, nauseating task. Blood spattered the dead man's iron-gray hair and neatly trimmed mustache and beard. His hanging body had been riddled by bullets. Tom Morgan's pockets had been emptied. A

rifled money belt lay on the ground. The worn holster that had carried Tom Morgan's hair-triggered six-shooter was empty. There was no trace of the horse he had ridden here, or the saddle. But the corral showed sign of a bunch of horses having been penned there, not later than last night. And Scott reckoned that the hanging had taken place about that time.

The place was deserted. But there was grub in the cabin, blankets on the bunk, dirty dishes on the stove and table. A little whiskey had been left in a jug. A deck of cards was scattered on the floor as if thrown there. And a pool of blood near the door had dried into the hard-packed dirt floor.

The cabin had undergone a hasty but thorough searching. In a couple of places the dirt floor had been dug up. A prospector's pick and shovel had been thrown aside. Scott took them, and selecting a spot under the leafy branches of a giant cottonwood, he dug his father's grave. He wrapped the bullet-riddled, hanged body of Tom Morgan in an army blanket and bed tarp, and buried it, while meadowlarks sang their early sunrise carol and curious magpies hopped boldly about, scolding.

The distant cavalry bugle at Fort Musselshell, across the river, sounded reveille at sunrise. Last night it had sounded taps. And Scott wondered if Tom Morgan, who had once been a gentleman and officer of that same cavalry, had heard—even as he had wondered last night just what sort of twisted, distorted reasoning it was that prompted the disgraced Army captain to build this cabin and corral here in the bend of the river across from the army fort, within ear-shot, if not sight, of cannon salute and bugle call.

Trees and willow thickets and the topography of the land hid the fort from this place. But by crow's flight, it was

not more than a few miles. And on mornings or evenings like this, with the breeze right, the sound of the bugle, by which Tom Morgan, West Pointer and Captain of the U.S. Cavalry, had marked his waking and sleeping hours so many years, came with haunting clarity.

What could have been the emotions of the man, a cast-off from his own kind, living the life of an outlaw and renegade, as he spent his days and nights in lonely exile within hearing, almost within sight, of a cavalry outpost where a part of his old regiment was stationed even now? What had been the motive for this self-inflicted torture?

THE charge against Captain Tom Morgan, five years ago, back at Fort Scott, Kansas, had been theft. Theft, at first. Then when he had run away, instead of standing his ground like a man to face and defend himself against that charge of rank dishonor, the charge of desertion in time of war had been added, carrying a sentence of death.

West Point Cadet Scott Morgan had gotten the news of his father's disgrace, his subsequent disappearance, on the eve of his graduation. And on top of that shock, that damnable blow to his happiness and pride, had come news of his mother's death. An accidental death, the telegram had said. Others, more brutal, had whispered suicide as the real cause. They maintained, and proved their point by strong, persuasive argument, that Martha Morgan, the daughter of that fighting Colonel Ware who had died so gloriously in the Mexican War, was too level-headed to mistake poison for the medicine she had been taking for the violent headaches she'd suffered since her husband's desertion.

Scott Morgan had gone back to Fort Scott for his mother's funeral. When his leave of absence was up, he'd obeyed Army orders and had reported for duty at

Washington. By request, he had been sent to Arizona Territory then, and for two years he had chased the warlike Apaches.

On such dangerous outpost duty, a man is judged by his own merits and not damned by the faults of his father. Lieutenant Scott Morgan had become Captain Scott Morgan, and he'd won the respect and friendship of his fellow officers by sheer bravery and hard, gruelling campaigning.

Then he'd been transferred, for no apparent reason; sent to larger Army posts. And he'd been pointed out as the son of Captain Tom Morgan, who had disgraced the United States uniform by proving himself a thief, a coward and a quitter under fire of court martial accusations. Life became unbearable, so Scott Morgan, Captain of Cavalry, resigned.

He had a natural gift for scouting. He knew the ways of Indians. He piloted wagon trains, went up the long trail from Texas to Montana with herds of long-horns, roamed where he willed. Jim Bridger, Cody, other famous plainsmen were his friends.

At Fort Bridger he'd gotten that letter from Tom Morgan who had disappeared as though he'd been swallowed by the earth. In boyhood and youth Scott had honored, respected, loved the reckless, daring handsome Tom Morgan who had been General Custer's comrade. Everyone knew of Captain Tom Morgan's gallantry and conspicuous bravery in the Indian campaigns. Idol of his men, beloved by women, envied and sometimes disliked by fellow officers because of his swift temper, his disregard for subordination, his reckless daring in battle. . . . That was the Tom Morgan Scott had loved.

Then that unbelievable, black disgrace! And an investigation had brought to light the ugly rumors that Tom Morgan had been a hard gambler, had played fast and loose with women, had secretly stolen

Army funds in a desperate last hope to recoup his gambling losses. But still Scott would have forgiven his father, would have loved him and fought for him—until his mother's tragic death.

The evidence was there, plain for any but the blind, deaf and dumb to recognize. Tom Morgan's wife had taken her own life because she could not live under that black cloud of disgrace. She was an Army woman, born and raised in Army traditions. Snubs or accusations of enemies, she would have gladly faced and fought. But Martha Morgan could not have lived with the pity of friends. Scott understood. He had never for an instant blamed her, in any way, for the thing she had done in taking her own life.

But her death had poisoned his heart with a terrible, bitter hatred for the man who was his father. Scott's one obsessing dream had been to meet Tom Morgan face to face, to accuse him of Martha Morgan's murder, to shoot him down for a blackguard. Yet there had been times when his old faith in Tom Morgan had flickered to new life, like a candlelight in a storm. And he had called his father's accusers damned liars. There had been more than one fight. For bitter though he was in his own silent, tight-lipped condemnation of Tom Morgan, he'd never let any man call his father a hard name.

Now he had found Tom Morgan hanged like a common thief or murderer. And he'd come too late to hear what Tom Morgan might have had to say in defense of his blackened honor.

With head bared, there at sunrise, Scott Morgan stood by the new grave beneath the giant cottonwood. In a hushed, unsteady voice, he offered final prayer and tribute to his dead father.

"Sir, you have gone to stand your court martial before the Highest Judge Advocate. He who knows truth will judge you. May God in His mercy reunite you with our dear Martha. Amen."

"And Amen to that," spoke a voice from behind him.

SCOTT MORGAN whirled, his hand on his gun. An undersized, bowlegged, gray-mustached man in shabby, hard-worn cowpuncher garb stepped from behind a red willow thicket. His face was deeply pock-marked and criss-crossed with hard-etched lines, weathered to the color of old saddle leather. Under shaggy, irregular brows, twinkled the bluest, keenest, coldest eyes Scott had ever looked into. There was a faint, hard-lipped grin on his face. He slowly shoved a long-barreled six-shooter into the shabby holster tied low on his thigh.

"No need to go clawin' fer your gun, young feller," he said in a dry, rasping voice. "If I'd wanted gun play, I coulda killed you long ago from the brush. Is your name Scott Morgan?"

"Yes. But—"

"I figgered so. Who's that you been plantin'?"

"My father. Tom Morgan. Who are you?"

"I warned Tom them snakes would git 'im if he showed up here. I got here as quick as I could cut 'er. I wasn't goin' to let 'im chance 'er alone. I knowed he was comin' here to meet you, riskin' his hide to have a word with the son that hated his guts and condemned him without a hearin', the same as them brass-buttoned, boot-polished sons that outlawed the bravest man I ever sided in a fight. Hell, you don't look like a man that'd turn thumbs down on his own daddy. You got Tom's eyes and the same set to your jaw. Like as not you got Tom's nerve, the same as you fell heir to his gray eyes and black hair and jawbone. . . . By Gawdamighty! You didn't kill Tom?"

The long-barreled six-shooter slid into view with such speed that Scott's eyes hadn't even seen the move.

"I found his body hangin' to the cross pole of the corral gate," said Scott Morgan, "riddled with a dozen bullets. I cut him down and gave him the best burial I could. Who are you? Who ever told you or Tom Morgan that I had damned him?"

"Tom heard it often enough, in round-about ways. But I don't actually think he believed it. Tom worshipped you, like he worshipped your mother. Tom Morgan feared death less than any man I ever knowed. But he wanted to live long enough to whitewash his name and kill the man or men responsible for it all. He'd have done it, too, if he'd lived. He wanted you here on the spot to witness it. But they got him. Did anybody see that letter he sent to Fort Bridger? Anybody know you was comin' here, or why?"

"Nobody. The letter said to keep it secret, avoid any Army posts or towns where I'd be recognized as Tom Morgan's son. I didn't even tell Jim Bridger. I left the same night the Injun fetched the letter and map. I traveled alone and saw nobody."

"Good. Let's get away from here. The bend's clean as a hound's tooth now, but this place ain't safe. How long you been here?"

"I got here at daybreak. I was supposed to meet him here tonight, but I traveled hard and made it sooner. I rode up at dawn, to find my father's body hung. There'd been horses in the corral. The cabin had been searched. The hanging must have taken place last night."

"Let's git away. Rattle your hocks. It's your fight now, Scott Morgan, and I'm sidin' you because I was Tom's partner."

"You didn't tell me your name. I didn't know Tom Morgan had a partner. The letter never mentioned anybody siding him."

"No. Honest men don't brag about claimin' the friendship of Stub Winters."

"Stub Winters?" echoed Scott, recoiling

as if struck. "You're Stub Winters?"

"I'm Stub Winters. There's a fancy price on my hide. They'll tell you I'm the killin'est blackguard unhung in Montana Territory or anywhere else—cattle rustler, horse thief, road agent; and killin' is my trade. You needn't shy off. It ain't contagious."

Scott grinned and held out his hand. "I wasn't shying off, mister. Jim Bridger tells a different story about the man that did a job of doctoring the settlement of Beaver Creek when the smallpox hit there and the Army doctor refused to go. He tells how Stub Winters brought through the Mormon wagon train when the Sioux ran a cavalry detachment back to their fort. Pat Driscoll told me how you'd saved the U Bar N trail herd on the way up. You can't blackguard yourself to me, Stub Winters. Men like Jim Bridger and Buffalo Bill Cody and Wild Bill Hickok don't scatter praise where it ain't deserved. And only the night before I left Fort Bridger, I heard Jim say that Stub Winters and his partner Tom Jefferson were worth a troop of any cavalry. Heroes, was what he called you two. The price was put on your heads by blackleg enemies."

Stub Winters' pitted, scarred, seamed face crinkled in a grin. His blue eyes were sparks of dancing lights.

"What was your father's full name, Scott?"

"Thomas Jefferson Morgan."

"And Jim Bridger shore didn't call Tom Jefferson no coward, did he? Ketch on?"

"You mean Tom Jefferson, the fightin' Tom Jefferson, Stub Winters' partner, was—"

"Was Tom Jefferson Morgan, with his last name de-horned, fer what you might call obvious reasons. Fork your hoss, son. Let's git clear of here."

Scott got his horse at the corral and rode back to the grave. He pulled up.

Stub Winters was standing there, his hat off, white hair a shaggy mane about his bowed head. Tears were coursing down his seamed, scarred, leathery cheeks. And his lips were moving.

"... till the last one of 'em is dead, Tom. So help me God!"

CHAPTER THREE

Badlands' Reception

"THERE'S no need," Stub Winters told Scott, "wastin' time here in the bend. There's plenty sign all around here, but I don't need to read any of it to figger out how Tom was ketched here and shot down in the cabin, then his dead body hung. I didn't see Tom's dead body, but I'd bet all I got, which ain't much, that the first shot that struck him, hit him in the back. It was fired from behind. That shot killed him. The rest of the bullets they put in him was fer what you might call decoration. And to give strength to the damned lie, they aimed to tell about how the night-ridin' Vigilantes tracked down, captured and hung the hoss thief, Tom Jefferson, ketchin' him red-handed with a bunch of stolen hosses. The low-down sons! Foller me, Scott, and we'll watch somethin'."

Stub Winters took a trail that twisted

through the willow thickets. Halting behind a dense screen of brush, he dismounted and motioned Scott to do likewise. They slid their carbines from the saddle scabbards, and Stub Winters took a brass-bound navy spyglass from a buckskin case he carried slung like a powder-horn under his left arm. They made their way on foot to the river's edge. Stub handed Scott the spyglass and pointed to riders over across on the fort's side of the river.

"Tell me what you make of it, son," he rasped, his blue eyes narrowed and hard, as he peered from under the slanted brim of his battered hat at the men and horses on the south bank, gathered near several large skiffs at the water's edge.

"An officer and eight soldiers," said Scott, studying the scene on the far bank through the powerful glass. "Five civilians. One's a buckskin man. The others look like cowhands."

"Recognize any of 'em?"

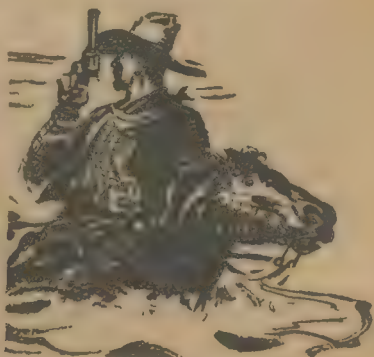
"The officer looks like Major Bullock. . . . The buckskin man is an Army scout named Spikes. The rest are men I never saw before, as I recall. Bullock's a paymaster in the Q.M. Department. He's the man who preferred charges against Captain Tom Morgan five years ago, charging him with theft of money he'd sent with my father to pay for horses

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being purchased at Fort Scott. He claimed that Captain Morgan took the money and disappeared. Spikes was in charge of the men breaking horses at the remount depot at the time."

"That's the set-up. What are they doin' acrost yonder now?"

"Major Bullock and Spikes are gettin' into skiffs. Soldiers are handlin' the oars. The two squads of soldiers, a sergeant in charge, and the four cowboys are ridin' into the river, leadin' Bullock's mount and Spikes' horse. They're comin' across."

"You already know Bullock and Spikes," said Stub Winters. "Now take a good look at them four civilian fellers, so's you'll know 'em when you cut their sign again. The soldiers don't count. They're just takin' orders. Got them four gents pictured good in your mind?"

"Plain as tin-types, Stub."

"Then let's haul outa here before they git acrost and find us. Spikes and them four is the men that killed Tom last night, hung his body to the corral gate ridge pole, to make it look like vigilantes, and then swum the river and celebrated at the canteen. When they crossed the river, they shoved forty horses ahead of 'em, those that had been in Tom's corral."

"Spikes reported last night to General Strang, Commandin' Officer of Fort Musselshell, that he had recovered forty head of missin' horses stolen from the ranch on Crooked Crick, where they keep the broncs for remount bronc-fighters to gentle. Likewise, he reported that the hoss thieves had been run off and one of 'em killed, shot and hung accordin' to the punishment for hoss stealin' laid down by vigilante laws."

"General Strang is sendin' over Major Bullock to investigate the report that there's a hanged man at the Haunted Corral. That's the name of the camp in the bend—Haunted Corral. Tom wasn't the first man to be hung to that ridge log. And, Scott, he ain't goin' to be the last."

Stub Winters, squatting on his heels, had lined his sights on the two passengers in the two large skiffs manned by soldiers. He lowered the gun without having thumbed back the hammer.

"It's a temptation to knock both them thievin' murderin' yaller dogs off. But that wouldn't be clearin' Tom Morgan's name. Come on. When they find Tom's body cut down and buried, they'll figger Stub Winters has riz from the dead and come back to Haunted Corral to bury his pardner. You see, Scott, Spikes thinks I'm deader than a tick. Even Tom thought I'd been killed. Yep, Tom died a-thinkin' I'd been dead a week. Otherwise, he'd never have come here last night, alone, as he done. I couldn't git here sooner to head him off. . . . But let's git outa here. Give them snakes somethin' to spook about when they find Tom's grave. We'll play their damned game. Give 'em cards and spades, and still win. Let's git away from here before I line my sights on them two dirty buzzards and spoil the game Toin would want us to play."

STUB led the way into the badlands, to a hidden camp in the hills. Half a dozen of the best horses Scott had ever seen, grazed in a meadow near a spring of clear, sweet water. There was a small log cabin in the clearing, surrounded by scrub pines. A fat squaw puttered around an open fire, above which was hung a big black iron kettle on an iron tripod.

"The old lady," said Stub, "is hell fer stews. She makes a damn good mulligan if I make her keep it clean of prairie dog meat; there's been times though when I've et prairie dog and came back fer a second helpin'. Light and rest your saddle, son. This is my camp. Them dog-robbin' soldiers or Spike's men wouldn't set foot in these hills for all the gold ever panned at Last Chance and Virginia City. This is Sioux and outlaw country, and they

know enough to leave us strictly alone."

At sight of them, the fat squaw stiffened. She stared hard for a moment as they rode towards her. Stub, grinning, kept talking to Scott, though his blue eyes watched the squaw and the cabin.

The squaw suddenly broke into a wailing, jabbering outburst. Her arms waved, gesticulating. The door of the cabin was suddenly flung open, and a rather tall, slim girl in fringed and beaded buckskin, her blue-black hair parted in the middle, hung in braids on either side of an oval, sun-tanned face, stood there. Then she gave a startled cry.

"Like Tom figgered," chuckled Stub Winters, "the Old Lady and Wilma had me dead and buried a week ago."

As Stub Winters dismounted, the girl in buckskin came running. She threw her arms around the disreputable looking little old man, kissing him, laughing, crying a little. And the fat squaw looked on in beaming approval. Scott Morgan sat his horse, a little stunned and bewildered at sight of the girl.

She must be Stub's daughter, Scott reckoned. And that squaw, fat, greasy looking, was the mother of this girl, who was as pretty as a painted picture. Only the blue-black of the girl's hair betrayed her Indian blood. Her skin, though tanned, was that of a white girl; and her black-fringed eyes as sapphire blue as the Montana sky.

"Quit maulin' a man," complained Stub, wincing as the girl hugged him. She was a good head taller than he was. "Where's your company manners?"

He looked up at Scott, pride in his grin, his eyes twinkling. "Light, Scott, and drag her offen me. Wilma, this is Scott Morgan. Meet my daughter Wilma, Scott."

The girl's arms let go her father slowly. Over his shaggy white head, she looked up at Scott, who still sat his horse. The smile left her face. The

laughter went out of her eyes, leaving them as cold as blue ice.

"How do you do," she said stiffly.

Then she looked down at Stub Winters. "Buffalo Shield brought word you'd been killed, papa."

"Creased by a bullet er two. Pulled an Injun trick in the middle of the river as they was foggin' me up. Flopped off my hoss and slid under the water. Splashed like a dyin' thing, and sunk. Come up downstream and drifted ashore.

"It was nigh dark, and they was drunk enough to be easy fooled. But I was afoot and didn't git within stealin' distance of a hoss fer two days and nights. Slipped into a ranch and borrowed the loan of a hoss. And here I am. Look after Scott while I git the Old Woman to patch up some nicks in my hide. And don't look thataway at the boy. He ain't got hydrophobia."

"Where's Uncle Tom?" The girl's voice was sharp with suspicion.

"Tom," said Stub Winters, "crossed the Big Divide last night. Scott is playin' Tom's hand out."

"Uncle Tom's . . . dead?"

"His troubles is all over, at last." Stub Winters put an arm around the girl's slim waist. "Don't cry, honey. Tom's happy now, I reckon—a heap happier than we ever knowed him to be."

The girl's eyes were staring at Scott, hard, bright, loathing and contempt in their blue depths.

"You," she said slowly, her voice low-toned, cutting, "his own son, and your mother, killed one of the finest, bravest saddest men that ever lived. His only hope on earth was to clean the dirt from his name—dirt put there by cowards, left there by those he loved and trusted. You killed your father years ago, you and your mother!"

She whirled and ran back to the cabin, slamming the door behind her.

"I DIDN'T expect her to act thataway, Scott," said Stub Winters. "I figured that when she took a good look at you, she'd know that you wasn't the low-down quitter you'd been painted. You see, Scott, Tom brooded a lot. He drank too much. There was times when we watched him close to keep him from killin' hisself. He'd hole-up at that camp at the Haunted Corral, just so's he could listen to the bugle soundin' reveille and boots and saddles and taps. The cavalry was in his blood. They'd cut out the man's heart, and he'd kept on livin'.

"He got hold of damned lies. How his wife had killed herself because he'd disgraced his uniform. How his son had sworn to shoot him on sight, like he'd shoot a mad dog.

"Wilma stuck by him many a long, black night, when his brain was twisted by whiskey and grief. Mebbyso he talked to her, as a man will talk to a woman when he'd never unloosen his grief to another man. Don't be too hard on the girl, Scott. She thought a heap of Tom. And he loved her as he'd have loved his own daughter."

"I aimed to face my father," said Scott, white-lipped still under the contemptuous words of this halfbreed girl. "I aimed to have it out with him. But so help me God, Stub, I never told that to any man. Whoever said I spoke a word against Tom Morgan, lied.

"As for my mother, she died while I was at West Point. I'm alive to face my accusers. My mother is dead. If she had blame for my father, there was sufficient cause. He didn't come back to face the court martial hearing on charges of theft. He never came back to face the graver charge of desertion. It was not in my mother's heart to condemn the man she worshipped. I know that. I'll never believe she took her own life. I'd give my life to know the real cause of her death. . . ."

"Light and rest your saddle, son. Wilma's just upset. I'll have a talk with her directly."

As he spoke, the little old plainsman and cowhand peeled off his service-scarred buckskin shirt. Underneath were dislodged, soiled bandages. His ribs and back were covered with blood that flowed from three separate wounds.

"I had no idea," said Scott, swinging from his saddle to lend a hand, "that you were all shot up."

"Wilma dislodged the bandages with her maulin'," grinned Stub, as the squaw came out with a jug of whiskey and a pail of hot water. "A shot of likker won't do neither of us no harm. I ain't hurt as bad as it looks. Yonder comes Wilma with bandages. Don't pay her no never-minds, son. She'll swing around."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bait for a Murder Trap

BUT Wilma Winters did not, as Stub had so optimistically expressed it, 'swing around'. Scott met with a rebuff when he sought to talk to her on the subject, and after that he made no further attempt to gain her friendship.

The girl was in the saddle most of the time. When she rode, she wore the ringed buckskin of a plainsman, and cowboy boots and a man's felt hat, with her hair coiled up under the high crown. She was one of the best target shots Scott had ever seen, with rifle or pistol. And she had a way with a horse.

Reluctantly, he admitted his admiration for this black-haired, blue-eyed girl. It was hard to believe that she was a halfbreed, that the paunchy, guttural-voiced, prairiedog-eating squaw was her mother. He'd hoped that she was adopted, hinted at the theory. And Spud Winters had settled the question.

"Wilma," he said, "takes after me, and

I'm glad of it. I'd hate to have her grow up to be a blanketed, moccasin-footed squaw like the Old Woman yonder, stirrin' and sniffin' her kettle of dog stew. I got ambitions for the girl. I got placer gold cached away for her education. Come September, she'll go back to school again, to college. Study music some more, and art and so on. So's she kin hold her own in any company.

"I'll leave her wealthy when I die. She'll marry a white man and make him a first-rate wife. Nobody ever need know she's the 'breed daughter of a kinnikinick-smokin' squaw. Eh, Scott? She's got duds in her trunk that she wears at school in St. Louis. Git her dressed up in one of them frilly dresses, and you'd shore never take her fer the daughter of a skalawag cowhand and a Sioux squaw."

Stub's boasting of his daughter's mixed parentage and how he aimed to marry her to some rich St. Louis merchant or a ranking army officer, made Scott Morgan a little sick inside. He was glad when Stub switched the subject.

"There's three hundred head of cracker-jack mares at the remount station on Crooked Crick," he told Scott. "They'll run half and two-thirds thoroughbred. And there're two of the finest Morgan studs that ever come outa Kentucky. They're at the big horse camp. General Strang had 'em fetched up this Spring. It's his aim to breed cavalry horses here in Montana. He figgers that bein' born and raised here in this climate will make the mounts tougher and better-boned and with better wind and bottom than Kentucky-raised horses. A man could git away with part of them mares and a stud or two—run 'em off and hold 'em in the badlands. You could raise and sell horses to the cow outfits that'd pay top prices and ask no questions. The U.S. brand them mares and studs wear is easy changed. The U.S. makes a purty 108 iron, fer instance."

"You'd never get away with a steal like that, Stub. Old General Strang would track you down and have you skinned alive."

"No. He'd try to locate his stolen horses, but he'd never find the place I'd take 'em. A hard day's ride from here is the Little Rockies. Up on the head of Beaver Crick is a hidden valley that only the Injuns know about. With a handful of Injuns like Buffalo Shield, the Old Woman's brother, I kin run off them mares and studs, fifty-sixty head at a time, when the moon's right, and have 'em cached in the Little Rockies and the sign blotted out before reveille the next mornin'."

Stub Winters winked at Scott and went on. "Major Bullock is in charge of the remount station and all the stock. The man directly under him is Spikes. Under Spikes is them four civilians you seen cross the river to the Haunted Corral. Scott, we ain't stealin' them mares and stud-hosses. Nothin' so rank as that! We're makin' a quiet little dicker with Major Bullock and Spikes. We'll pay Bullock fifty dollars a round fer them mares, and five hundred fer the two studs. Fifteen thousand five hundred dollars in gold is a lot of money to a Q.M. major and a two-bit buckskin scout. Want to go pardners with me in the hoss business?"

"I haven't a thousand dollars to my name, Stub. Besides—"

"Me and Tom Morgan struck 'er rich two-three years ago. We panned gold at Virginia City, cleaned up big. Moved in to Last Chance Gulch and panned the golden guts outa five claims there. You're Tom Morgan's heir. He left you more gold than you'll ever know how to spend without throwing it away. You got the gold to go into the hoss business. All you need is the inclination."

"Stealin' horses from the U.S. government, Stub is somethin' I don't like. I can't stomach the game. I'm sorry."

STUB WINTERS chuckled. "Then I'll play the game alone. I'll have them hosses delivered to the Haunted Corral. I'll pay off Bullock and Spikes in gold and git my written and signed receipt, with Bullock's and Spikes' signatures attached. I'll shoot 'er out with them two blacklegs. Then I'll call General Strang over from Fort Musselshell to identify the carcasses of two of the damnedest, lowest-down crooks that ever foisted their guilt on a brave officer like Captain Tom Morgan. I'll call old General Strang over fer a look at the two carcasses swingin' from the ridge log of the Haunted Corral!"

"Stub!" cried Scott Morgan, jumping up from the pine log on which they'd been sitting. "Stub! I'm your horse thief! Cuss me out for a thick-skulled idiot! I see the game. But can we swing it?"

"We kin try, son. Tom tried it and they trapped him. That was Tom Morgan's scheme. He'd dealt with Bullock and Spikes a few times, always at night. Tom had growed a beard, and his face was scarred. They knowed him as Tom Jefferson. Bullock and Spikes would have taken their oath, understand, that Captain Tom Morgan was dead, that he'd been killed five years ago down in Kansas when he was held up and robbed of the gover'ment money he was carryin'. Bullock and his cronies built up all them lies about Captain Tom Morgan runnin' off. Aye. There's your story in a nut shell.

"Me and Tom was aimin' to trap Bullock and Spikes, his pardner, at the Haunted Corral, the night you'd show up there. They was to deliver some horses, and we'd pay 'em off an' git their receipt. Then Spikes taken the notion to double-cross us. Spikes and his four men, disguised, so they figgered, as Injuns, jumped me, shot hell outa me, and marked me off as killed.

"Spikes sent word to Tom here at my camp, that I'd been killed by Injuns. He

used Buffalo Shield, who is a Gover'ment scout at Fort Musselshell, to deliver the message. Buffalo Shield knowed that no Injuns killed me. He told Tom and Wilma and the Old Woman that I'd been killed, and that Spikes mebbysso had a hand in the killin', because he had a lot of gold to spend at the canteen fer booze.

"Buffalo Shield likewise fetched a note from Bullock, fer Tom. It was unsigned. The note said the horses would be delivered at the Haunted Corral the night of June the Third, instead of June the Fourth, as we'd arranged. Why they changed the date, I don't know, unless Bullock was pressed for money. Anyhow, Tom rode there alone. You know the rest, Scott. Spikes and his four blacklegs murdered him, robbed him, strung his body up, and took the horses back to Fort Musselshell with a fine, trumped-up yarn about the killin' of Tom Jefferson, the hoss thief. I got the story from Buffalo Shield."

"And you think we can trap Spikes and Bullock? Won't they be suspicious when they find out you're alive?"

"Nobody exceptin' you and Buffalo Shield, Wilma and the Old Woman know that I'm alive. You're goin' to do the dickerin' with Spikes and Major Bullock."

SCOTT grinned. "Good. They don't know my face. I never laid eyes on either of them until after I was out of the Army. They were pointed out to me a few months ago at St. Louis."

"That's better than I'd hoped fer. Fits into the plan me and Wilma has been cookin' up. Spikes is plumb stuck on the girl. She's been meetin' him when she makes them lone rides. And he's soft as clay in her hands. I got her workin' on him. And she tells me he's ready and willin' to steal, or do murder fer her."

"You mean," said Scott, his voice hot, "that you'd let that bloody-handed murderer make love to your own daughter?"

"Hold your hosses, son. And don't yell so's she kin overhear yuh, or she'll spit and claw like a bobcat. She ain't lettin' Spikes ner no man go pawin' an' slobberin' over her. . . . Fer all she's a 'breed, she's got white woman's ways. Buffalo Shield is never far off when she meets Spikes in the bend near the Haunted Corral. He trails her from the time she leaves camp till she gits back. If you'd looked, you'd picked up his tracks trailin' hers when she rides off alone. Buffalo Shield is camped near here now. So don't go gittin' no wrong idees about my young un playin' fast and loose."

"I wasn't accusing Wilma of anything of that sort, Stub. I'm damned sorry."

"Don't fret yourself, son. I ain't hurt. But she'd claw an' spit if she was to overhear." Stub Winters hid another grin.

Scott cast an uneasy glance around. Not far away, behind the thicket of choke-cherry brush and wild roses, was a skin tepee where Wilma slept and spent a lot of her spare time. But there was no sign of her now. Scott could only hope she hadn't heard.

"Wilma and Buffalo Shield," Stub went on, "between 'em, has cooked up a yarn they've passed on to Spikes. She's told him that a feller that was sort of a side-pardner of Tom's and mine has showed up. Learnin' that Tom Jefferson had been hung by vigilantes and Stub Winters killed by Injuns, he showed up to take care of Wilma. This feller is young and wild and has plenty of gold. He's bound that Wilma is goin' to marry him. He's willin' to pay gold fer good mares and a stud er two to start a hoss ranch. The feller's name, Wilma has told Spikes, is Scott. . . . Meanin', of course, you."

"Whew!" Scott gave a low whistle of astonishment. Then he grinned faintly as he looked into Stub Winter's twinkling blue eyes. "You were mighty sure of me goin' through, eh, Stub?"

"Naturally," nodded Stub Winters.

"You bein' Tom's son and his spittin' image." And they both grinned.

"THE scheme's cooked and about to come to a boil, son," Stub went on. "You'll meet Spikes and Major Bullock tonight at the Haunted Corral. You see, Bullock don't dare trust Spikes with the gold you'll pay him. He's goin' to be there in person. You'll git his name on the bill of sale for them mares and two studs. You're to meet Spikes and Bullock in the cabin, as Tom met 'em. And you don't need to be told that they'll plan to murder you as they killed your father."

"I'll gamble on that," said Scott.

"I'll be somewhere in the shadders, lookin' as much like a buck Injun as paint and dirt and buckskin kin make me. You're fetchin' Buffalo Shield and some of his Sioux warriors to take over the horses, savvy? I'll be one of them Injuns. Spikes thinks he has Buffalo Shield bought off. Yeah. He's givin' Buffalo Shield five mares to not come near the cabin if he hears ary shootin' inside."

"And you'll be one of the Injuns?" grinned Scott.

"Exactly. I'll be there to help you handle Spikes and Bullock. Buffalo Shield and his men will settle with Spikes' four tough hands that's put the horses in the Haunted Corral as per agreement."

"Isn't there the chance that Bullock has taken General Strang into his confidence?" asked Scott. "Hoping to get the gold I'll bring, and deliver the mares back? He might get a promotion out of it."

"Bullock wants that gold. He couldn't keep it if he let General Strang in on the game. No, he's not double-crossin' us thataway, though he might take a notion to shoot Spikes in the back if he ever got the chance. But he won't. Unless my calculations are way off, Spikes aims to kill Bullock tonight, when and about the

same second him and Bullock is murderin' you, Scott. Spikes plans to take his four renegades, Buffalo Shield and the Injuns, and haze them horses for the Little Rockies. He'll stop long enough to pick up Wilma on his way."

"Spikes," Scott said grimly, "is a gamblin' man who plays for the big stakes."

"He is, Scott. He's that, fer a fact. He's got it planned to git the gold, the finest bunch of mares and the two best studs this side of Kentucky, and the purtiest gal in the country. All he's got to do is kill that big, pot-bellied, white-livered Q. M. major and a feller named Scott. Lookin' at it with Spike's gambler's eye, it's a good bet."

Stub chuckled and winked slyly. "Don't never breathe a word of this to Wilma, son, but I had Buffalo Shield tell Spikes that she was shore struck on this Scott feller. And that it had been the lifetime wish of her ol' daddy and her Uncle Tom Jefferson that she'd marry the young Scott gent!"

From somewhere near the tepee behind the screen of chokecherry brush and wild roses there sounded a quick, smothered gasp, the snap of a dry twig under a moccasined foot, the rustle of brush against buckskin, the dull *plop* of the tepee flap closing.

Scott, red-faced, had gotten to his feet, expecting Wilma to come out of the brush, anger blazing in her eyes. His eyes stared in that direction. But Wilma, eavesdropper caught in her own trap, had fled to the sanctuary of her tepee.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ghost of the Haunted Corral

THERE were the mingled odors of the muddy river, sagebrush, driftwood, wild roses. A full moon was coming up over the tops of the giant cottonwoods, to

spread a silver sheen across the water and blacken the ground with the shadows of the brush. From Fort Musselshell, across the river, came the silver notes of a cavalry bugle sounding taps.

So the scene was set for Scott Morgan, who rode up to the Haunted Corral alone. And he could not help but wonder if he were seeing all this, the moonlit beauty of the summer night, the stars, the silvery water, the velvet shadows, for the last time. Scott shook off the chill. He grinned into the black shadows.

He had something to live for tonight. When he'd gone to get his horse, before he'd left camp on his lone ride, Wilma Winters had sought him out.

"I've tried," she had said, blocking his trail, "but I can't hate you. I know where you're going. You may never ride away from the Haunted Corral alive. And I won't let you go there thinking I hate you. Tom Morgan was as dear to me, almost, as my own father. . . ."

Scott had pulled her into his arms. He had held her close, with his heart pounding in his throat. He had found her lips warm against his, her arms around him.

"I'll come back from the Haunted Corral," he'd whispered huskily. "We'll be married."

Wilma had tilted her head back so that the moonlight fell on her face. Her cheeks had been marked by tears.

"You'll go back into the Army, Scott. You can't have a halfbreed for a wife!"

"I'm not goin' back into the Army. I'll go ranchin' with Stub." His voice was quick, positive—too quick, too positive.

"They killed your father when they took away his uniform. I have it in my trunk with his saber. I cleaned the blood from it, mended the bullet tears in the cloth. It is to be buried with him when you've cleared his name from disgrace and he's given a military funeral at Fort Musselshell. You'll get back your rank and the uniform you love. You were born

and raised in the cavalry. It's in your blood. I know, Scott. And the wife of Captain Scott Morgan can't be a 'breed girl. We both know that."

"I'll raise horses and cattle. You mean more to me than a captain's bars and a bugle call. I love you."

"And I love you, Scott. And it's unfair to trick you. I'm not a 'breed girl. There's not a drop of Indian blood in me, though I'd not be ashamed of it if there were. My mother's been dead for years. She was a white woman dad married when she was crossing the plains with the first wagon train he piloted. The Old Woman was my mother's servant, my nurse. Stub Winters isn't married to her. He isn't living with her as squaw men live with their Indian women. She's my nurse, still. I love her. And you know that Stub Winters is no horse thief or road agent, as he loves to paint himself. He just loves to talk like that. I made him fool you about my being a half-breed. I wanted to hurt you. I'm sorry. My mother's father was an Army officer. He fought in the Mexican War and was a colonel in the Confederate Army. You won't need to be ashamed of me, Captain Scott Morgan of the Cavalry."

So Scott had left her back at camp. He had grinned at Stub Winters, who was letting Buffalo Shield smear his body with grease and paint and fasten a war bonnet of gaudy, dyed horsehair to his thick gray hair. He looked for all the world like a breech-clouted, buckskin-legged, moccasined Sioux warrior, except for one glaring, incongruous item. Stub Winters had balked at shaving off his drooping mustache.

"I'll hold my hand over my haired lip," he protested stubbornly, "and keep to the deep shadders. I was practically born with this mustache. I'd die of exposure and naked shame without it."

Stub shook hands with Scott and told him to keep the main trail.

SCOTT MORGAN rode into the bend along the wide trail. He could hear horses milling in the corral. And he knew that the shadows near the corral hid the four renegades who worked for the buckskin man, Spikes. He glanced up at the ridge log that spanned the tops of the high gate posts, fifteen feet or more above the ground, where he had found his father's body hanging.

The dread and fear that had edged his nerves were gone. Hatred and revenge steeled his muscles and nerves, as his hard, narrowed gaze shifted to the light that showed through the open doorway of the small log cabin.

Across Scott's saddle had been slung leather saddlebags, heavy with gold. The gold and currency in those bags amounted to fifteen thousand five hundred dollars. He pulled up near the cabin. His right hand was on the cedar butt of his barreled six-shooter.

Inside the cabin, seated at either end of a table, which was bare save for a jug and three tin cups, sat two men. One of them had long yellow hair, yellow mustache, and pale gray-green eyes. A handsome man, eagle-beaked, thin-lipped, bronzed, his buckskin clothes heavily fringed and decorated with gaily-colored beadwork . . . Spikes.

Major Bullock had left off the uniform he was disgracing, and wore shabby buckskin hunting clothes. He was a large, florid, dark-eyed, gray-haired man with a large gold diamond ring on his left hand. Never a West Pointer, he had come into the Army after a none too savory career as a fur trader and cotton broker in the South. There was an alcoholic, florid color to his smooth cheeks and jowls, and he smelled of hair tonic.

Scott swung to the ground from the saddle. Though the night was but pleasantly cool, he'd worn an old army poncho. He slipped out of its concealing cover and stood in the shadow of his horse. He

stood there—in the cavalry uniform that Captain Tom Morgan had worn when he had ridden away from Fort Scott with money-filled saddlebags, never to return. The uniform had been a last minute inspiration suggested to Scott's mind by Wilma's mention of Tom Morgan's uniform, which she had kept in her trunk.

"The spittin' image of Captain Tom Morgan!" Stub Winters had gasped, when Scott had shaved and donned the uniform.

Cavalry saber clanking, his hand on his six-shooter, Scott stepped into the lighted doorway, shut the door behind him.

Spikes and Major Bullock saw the ghost of Tom Morgan standing in the lantern light. Their faces changed expression in the flash of a second. Spikes' turned greenish yellow. Bullock's jowled face was sickly, mottled. His somewhat protruding eyes seemed to bulge.

From the darkness outside came the smothered outcry of a man choked or knocked on the head. With the door shut to prevent such a shot as had caught Tom Morgan in the back on this same spot, Scott faced the two men in the cabin. There was a faint grin on his tanned face, deadly hardness in his cold gray eyes. His hand rested firmly on his gun-butt.

"Get out your pen and ink, Bullock, and sign the bill of sale for those mares and two studs you've put in the corral." Scott's voice filled the cabin, though he spoke in a low, flat tone. "And when you've signed it, you and Spikes, you'll write out a full confession of your devilish blackleg part in the disgracing of Captain Tom Morgan. I'm Scott Morgan."

CHAPTER SIX

Taps for a Hero

THAT first shock of terror was leaving the two men. Spikes was the first to recover his nerve.

From outside there came the sudden sound of shots and men yelling. It was the break for which Spikes had watched. Too late Scott saw Spikes' move.

A sudden sweep of Spikes' left arm sent the lantern crashing to the floor, plunging the room into instant darkness. With a cougar-like spring, the buckskin man plunged through the darkness. His hurtling form knocked Scott backwards.

Scott grappled with him. They went down, locked in a deadly, fighting grip. Scott's only weapon was the long-barreled six-shooter he was using as a club. Spikes was wielding a deadlier, swifter, handier weapon—a long-bladed, needle-pointed, razor-edged hunting knife. Scott felt the sting of its sharp blade in his shoulder.

Then the small cabin was suddenly filled with blinding gun flashes and the thundering blast of a black powder .44. Major Bullock had backed into a corner and was shooting at the fighting men. He was shooting to kill and hoping to kill them both.

Spikes was fighting with the desperate fury of a madman. His knife ripped Scott's army blouse and flannel shirt, tore his flesh, stabbing to the bone. Then, with a metallic snap, the blade somehow broke near the hilt. There was only part of an inch of broken blade left.

Scott had no time to wonder what had happened to Stub. He was fighting for his life. Spikes' neck twisted from his grip. Bullock's gun roared. Spikes' let out a snarl of pain as the slug from Bullock's gun struck him. Then Scott's gun spat flame. Spikes' snarl broke off in an animal-like scream. Scott shot at the flash of Bullock's gun. Bullock gave a startled, terrified howl.

"Don't shoot! Don't kill me! You've hit me in the belly! You've killed me!"

Then the door burst open, letting in a shaft of moonlight. Stub Winters barked out something in Sioux. Then he called out in his own tongue.

"Scott! Scott, boy! Sing out!"

"Stub! Stub Winters!" whined Bullock. "Don't shoot! Let me out of here!"

"Come out, Bullock," gritted Stub. "With your hands lifted high."

Bullock's big form stumbled out. As it was silhouetted against the moonlit sky outside, there came the flash and roar of a gun inside the cabin. Bullock reeled.

Scott sprang at the flash of Spikes' murderous gun. He grabbed the man's gun arm and wrenched the gun free of the clutching fingers. Then he twisted the buckskin man's arms back in a double hammerlock and sat on Spikes' flanks.

"Tend to Bullock, Stub!" he called. "Get that confession out of the big black-leg before he dies."

AN INDIAN came with a lantern. Bullock, moaning, bleeding desperately wounded, was fetched inside and laid on the bunk. Spikes was tied and left lying on the floor. Wounded in the shoulder, he was cursing, fighting. While Buffalo Shield was hunting for pen and ink, Scott bent over Bullock. Stub Winters swore huskily as he explained his delay in getting to Scott's rescue.

"There was three bushwhackers instead of just one outside, hid in the brush to plug you as you walked through the doorway into the lighted cabin. One sighted my mustache. I tomahawked him as he yelped. Got the second un just as you shed the poncho and stepped to the doorway. The third un sighted your uniform, I reckon, and was too dumfounded to shoot yuh. The door shut on you. And as it did, some dirty, low-down bushwhacker cracked me on the head from behind. Two of 'em jumped me, and the war was on. Buffalo Shield and his Injuns had their hands full. Bullock musta fetched four soldiers with him, four of his Quartermaster Department store keepers, to help him in a tight. Besides Spikes' four rascals, we had four of Bullock's—"

"Dad! Scott!" Wilma's buckskin figure came into the cabin with a rush. "Scott, your back's covered with blood!"

"Scratches," said Scott gruffly. "Get paper and pen and ink, Wilma. Bullock's going to tell the truth before he dies."

Wilma found paper, pen and ink. Major Bullock, dying, did the only decent thing left for him to do.

"Spikes," he said as he wrote, "ambushed Tom Morgan. He shot him; robbed him; left him for dead. His orders were to hide the body. He did so. He swore he buried it in quicksand."

"So I did," snarled Spikes. "I killed Tom Morgan and shoved his carcass in quicksand along Mineral Springs."

"You should have stayed to make certain," snapped Stub. "The quicksand didn't go deep enough. I come along and hauled him out. The Old Woman and Wilma was camped with some Utes near there. They nursed Tom back to life. But it took weeks. And that give Bullock his chance and plenty time to spread his damned lies. Tom never had no gamblin' debts. He never stole a dollar in his life. Them affairs with women they talked about was innocent flirtations. Git it all down. You're clearin' Captain Tom Morgan's name before you go to hell."

Bullock's pen scratched on. One page. . . . Another. At last he paused and took a drink of whiskey.

"I'm guilty," he told Scott, before his eyes glazed. "It's written there. But no matter what punishment I get beyond this life, I've had five years of constant hell on earth. I killed the only woman I ever loved, your mother. She'd treated me decently. I mistook that pleasant decency for encouragement. I thought I'd have a chance, with Tom Morgan out of the way. When she shrank away from me like I was an unclean beast, when she accused me of having a hand in her husband's disappearance and almost got the truth out of me, I was afraid she'd find

out more. Another day or two, and she'd have found and revealed the whole thing. I switched the medicine the post doctor had given her. I had charge of the commissary and drugs. I filled the prescription with a poison instead of a harmless sedative. I killed Martha Morgan!"

Major Bullock's head rolled sideways. A spasm of pain crossed his mottled face. With a horrible scream, he stiffened.

"There," said Spikes, "died as low a yellow dog as ever drewed breath. He hired his killin' done when it was men. And murdered a woman! So Tom Jefferson was Captain Tom Morgan? I never guessed. I killed him and hung his carcass for Tom Jefferson. Because I figured he knowed about who killed Stub Winters. I figured you dead, Stub. That's twice I got fooled."

From outside came the pounding of shod hoofs, the clanking of sabers, a barked order. General Strang stood in the doorway, the lower part of his uniform dripping with water from swim-

ming the river.

Instinctively, Scott Morgan stiffened, heels clicking to attention. Blood-smeared, he stood swaying.

"Captain Tom Morgan!" gasped General Strang, who had never known Scott.

Scott smiled faintly. His knees buckled. He dropped in a blood-smeared heap on the dirt floor of the cabin.

MUFFLED drums at Fort Musselshell. . . . Captain Tom Morgan's old troop was riding behind the horse-drawn gun carriage that carried the flag-draped coffin. And at the head of the troop rode Captain Scott Morgan of the United States Cavalry, stiff-backed from the tape and bandages that bound him.

So Captain Tom Morgan was buried with full military honors. A rifle salute split the still air. The silvery notes of a bugle sounded taps. The echoes were lost in the Montana badlands—where you cross the Missouri River twice to get on the other side.

THE END

Statement of ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of March 3, 1933, of Ace-High Magazine, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1937. State of New York, county of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Harold S. Goldsmith, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Ace-High Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y., Harold S. Goldsmith, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner, and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. Harold S. Goldsmith, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October, 1937. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, New York County Clerk's No. 288, Register's No. 8W329. (My commission expires March 30, 1938.) [Seal]—Form 3526—Ed. 1933.

The Boothill Volunteer

By ROLAND LYNCH



With a thunderous roar, the herd milled. The steer sun-fished under Dale as Wild Bunch guns spoke.

"Nobody rides out on the Wild Bunch, and lives," Butch Cassidy warned. But the one girl in Dale Carson's life was calling for help, and Dale couldn't be expected to pause at danger—till he knew that those soft, long-lost lips, which cried his name, must always belong to another man!

DALE CARSON'S lips were thin as he faced the Wild Bunch leader. They sat at a card table in the cabin in the Hole-in-the-Wall. Dave said

tersely, "I'm ridin' out on you, Butch."

Cassidy tossed a chip into the pot and, without looking up, said, "Nobody's done that an' lived!"

There was a faint stir among the other men at the table. Sundance, Cassidy's youngest henchman, dropped one hand below the table. Kid Curry leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowed. Ben Kilpatrick, the Tall Texan, stared at his hole card with detached mien. The Merino's fingers drummed nervously on the baize. But the tension did not touch Dale.

"We'll see," he muttered testily.

Cassidy peered up through shaggy brows. "Don't be a fool, Carson," he said. "There's a prison term out there for you. You should know our breed hasn't time for women."

The bronze of Dale's face deepened. Butch had a mysterious way of peering inside a man. But Dale didn't falter. He said: "So long, boys!"

Cassidy came to his feet, his balled fists on the table top supporting his ponderous bulk. "Four years yo've ridden with us, Carson," he said tensely. "You'll find things changed out there."

Dale let his glance run around the table. Hard wind-burned faces looked stoically back at him. He was one of this bunch of men—and proud to have been. They were loyal, awaiting their leader's command even now—and he respected them for it. But not one of them knew the hunger within him . . . the beautiful magnet that drew him to the headwaters of Powder River Fork. After four years she had sent for him. She needed help. He was going to her.

Now he placed his hands on the table and looked squarely at Butch. "She's asked me to come back," he said. "There's trouble. But even if there wasn't . . . she's the only woman I'll ever love! When I'm through helpin' her, I'm turnin' myself over to Sheriff Mulford of Bluegrass. She's waited four years to send for me. . . . She'll wait a few more while I pay off the debt of my doings."

He turned from the cabin then, and strode straight to the corral. There he

roped out his favorite horse. As he saddled and swung up, he saw Butch and the others from the tail of his eye. They were grouped about the doorway, staring at him. By their very tenseness he knew that Butch but needed to nod his head.

As he spun his mount, he forced a smile to his lips and flung his hand aloft in salute. Then he was loping leisurely toward the notch in the hills that led from the Hole. The muscles in his back insisted on contracting. He had to set the cords of his neck to keep from looking back.

Then he was clear of the last sentry. And a life to which he would never return was left behind.

Ahead lay trouble and prison, but he could take those in his stride. Jo-Ann Carter had sent for him. . . .

AS HE rode along the piny reaches of the Big Horn Mountains, Dale drank in familiar landmarks. Somehow, they made him remember the night she had told him that nothing, not even she herself, would ever quench his love for danger. She told him his superior strength was made for risks beyond the law. She said society would never curb his spirit. And then she had said—goodbye.

Her prophecy had come true. Dale had ridden with the Wild Bunch. But now she was sending for him, calling him back! And he was ready to settle up with society, and live the life Jo-Ann dictated.

Now Dale rounded the lower slopes of the Big Horns and splashed into the Powder River Fork bosque. As he followed the sinuous course of the stream night piled down about him. A premonition of being followed came to him. He stopped and listened to his back trail. The croak of feeding bull bats and the burp of frogs was on the air. He grinned, and shaking off his ominous feeling, went on. When he reached the big clump of poplars bordering the Carter spread, he quit his horse. . . .

He went to the edge of the trees and studied the ranchhouse. Its yellow rec-tangles of light deepened the surrounding gloom. Then his lips pursed and his whistle carried low and flat. It was the call Jo-Ann and he always used.

A light winked in the cabin door. His heart stepped up a beat as he made out the running form of a girl. He waited until she was almost to the trees, then his whistle guided her to him. For this he would give himself up to the law! With a glad cry, he folded her into his arms. He hungered for her soft lips . . . but he found them creased and hard.

He released her, not understanding the pressure of her hands against his chest.

"You—you shouldn't have done that, Dale!" she gasped.

The youngster chuckled. "After all these years?" And he reached for her again. "Not just one kiss?"

She wriggled free. "Dale," she said, "I'm—I'm a married woman!"

The pit of Dale's stomach became bot-tomless. All his dreams were ashes at his feet. For a long moment he stared at Jo-Ann's supple silhouette.

Then anger touched him. "Who to?" "Chris Salvon."

Dale's teeth clicked. Chris Salvon . . . emblem of righteousness and stolidity, a plodding, colorless man. Chris had said, in his smug and lofty manner, that Dale would come to no good—and Dale had hated him for it.

"I'm glad you're here," Jo-Ann said quickly. "I was afraid you'd get my mes-sage too late."

Dale leaned against a tree trunk and jammed his thumbs in his crossed gun-belts. "An' the reason for my coming?" he muttered, tightly.

"I've no one to lean on," she answered quickly. "Dad's been dead two years now, and Chris's in trouble, Dale. Fent Cooper is pressing him to the wall. He's out to frame Chris, I know that! He's said as

much to me. An' the way he looks at me. . . ." She buried her face in her hands and a sob escaped her lips.

"Men don't appreciate other men help-ing their wives on the sly," Dale said re-lessly.

"I know. I know." She wrung her hands. "But you're the only one I can turn to . . . because—"

"Because I'm an outlaw!" he said bru-tally. "I'll ride off without asking pay-ment and leave you to go on with your husband!"

FOR a long moment she looked at him. The starglow revealed the bitter cast to his lips. She saw his deep hurt.

"I was a fool to do this," she said slow-ly. "Forgive me if you can. I was des-perate."

She turned toward the house, her shoulders bowed. The door winked and she was gone.

Dale stared into the space she had left. He felt like what he saw—nothing. Bitter resentment against Jo-Ann came to him. She had filled him with false hopes and dreams and then had coldly burst them. Chris Salvon could trod his own path. If Fent Cooper framed him—good enough. Perhaps it would take some of the high and mighty smugness out of his system.

Moodily, he turned to his horse. Where would he go now? He couldn't return to the Bunch. They'd hooraw him out of the Hole.

He climbed into the saddle. Then he was holding the reins tight. Once again it came to him that he was being fol-lowed.

He put his finger to the pulse of Nature and found Her undisturbed. He figured it was because he was alone that he was jumpy.

Abstractly, he turned into the reaches of the Big Horns. Slowly, he wound up-ward. Within him raged a battle he could not bring to peace. And suddenly he

realized Jo-Ann wasn't the fool he thought her. It was the instinct of every woman to protect her man in any manner she knew. In desperation she had called for him. She considered him a friend. Looking at it this way, Dale saw that she had never actually been more than a friend to him anyway. She had never said she loved him. She had simply tried to change him, to make a better man of him. And when she'd seen that was impossible, she had given him up.

What were friends for if you couldn't rely on them in a moment of duress? Dale censored himself for not having seen it that way before. He was a fool for not giving gladly when she asked it. He was a bitter, self-pitying fool!

With a curse, he turned his horse toward the Cooper Winged C. He knew Cooper and his two gun hirelings, Cat Powley and Pard Picket. They were gunmen with fast hands, quick tempers, and cunning brains. They had risen to affluence along the Powder River Fork.

He kept thinking about what Jo-Ann had said. Chris was entering into a cattle deal with Cooper. That meant a drive from one ranch to the other. It would be Chris that was buying.

He was jerked from his calculations by the low moaning of restless cattle. It came from one of the steep-walled canyons below him. He quit his horse, and sat down on a rock to await daylight.

He smoked cigarette after cigarette while the eastern sky rim paled. He could see cattle milling below him—within a hastily constructed corral. And nearby a group of four riders squatted.

Dale smiled thinly. He saw now that Jo-Ann's fears were not groundless. Tonight at that canyon mouth one of the cleverest frame-ups Dale had ever heard of was scheduled to be enacted. And the victim was to be—Chris Salvon.

When Chris drove the cattle he'd just bought from Fent Cooper through the

canyon tonight, Cooper's renegades down there would ride out and kill Chris and his men—and then mix the cattle in the corral with those that Chris was driving. Cooper would bring the sheriff and show him the evidence. Chris Salvon, he'd say, had bought a drive of cattle to cover another drive he was rustling. Cooper would show the sheriff the bill of sale, and have the sheriff count the number of head out there on the plain. Cooper would explain that he'd suspected Chris all along, and this time he'd trailed him.

Then and there Dale decided that Cooper's show was not going to come off. Chris was going to drive by that canyon tonight and continue on his smug way without knowing how close death had brushed him. Dale was going to see to that—for Jo-Ann. That he would probably die saving Chris seemed to matter little. . . .

NOW Dale snapped out his last cigarette and rose to his feet. His narrowed eyes fastened on a horseman. It was Jo-Ann! She was going to Fent's place. He clawed into the saddle and plunged recklessly down the slope. He had to head her off, or she'd ride right into those cattle penned below!

When she heard the clatter of his mount's hoofs, she turned to face him. There was a wilt of her body unpleasant to see. Her eyes were lackluster and weary. Her rich lips turned down.

"Go back home," he said gruffly. "Everything's all right."

There was payment for him in the way her face brightened. "You—you mean. . ."

"What good are friends if they can't help?" he said.

"God bless you!" she murmured.

"One thing," he went on harshly. "Get to Sheriff Mulford in Bluegrass. Have him at the mouth of Crazy Woman's canyon with a posse tonight. Tell him the

man stealin' the cattle in these parts will come out with the herd. After you tell him that, get me a cowbell somewhere. Tell the sheriff that when a bell begins ringin' to take over. Got that? I'll meet you here."

She looked at him strangely, not understanding his request. "Yes," she murmured, and her hand shot out. He gripped it and they smiled. "Thanks, Dale," she said.

He did not answer as she turned her horse away. He watched as she stretched her mount in a pace-eating lope for town.

When she was gone, Dale turned his hand palm up and looked at it. The warmth of her still lingered there. He shook himself. His business now with Sheriff Mulford was entirely different than he had planned.

He led his horse well among the trees and dismounted. Tying the animal, he stretched out by a tree and dozed off.

He awoke with a start. His hands streaked to his guns, but stopped as they struck the butts. Five grinning faces ringed him. Five men squatting on their haunches were watching him. Five lean, hard, wind-burned faces, with worldly wise eyes. Cassidy, Sundance, Curry, Kilpatrick and Merino!

"We tagged along," Butch chuckled.

Dale knew then that those premonitions of being followed were not imagination. The Bunch had been at his heels since his leaving the Hole-in-the-Wall.

"Why?" he asked narrowly.

Butch shrugged massive shoulders. "We figgered you might need help. What are friends for?"

Funny his words were like Dale's thoughts. Could Cassidy read inside a man?

"You knew then," muttered Dale, "that she was married?"

Butch nodded. "It's my business to know as much as I can. None of us were sure what you'd do when you found out.

That's why we didn't want you to go. Less has sent a man skiddin' to hell."

"I'm helpin' her out," said Dale. Then he told them what he knew, what he'd seen and what he'd guessed.

Sundance said, "Those penned cattle are Box M."

That bore out Dale's assumptions. Cooper was going to frame Box M rustling on Chris, too. He turned to Cassidy. "I sent—Jo-Ann—to Bluegrass to get the sheriff."

"Good!" Cassidy boomed. "I made Mulford a promise a long time ago I'd do something for him. He overlooked a little deal for some old folks once. This's my chance."

They nodded agreement. Then Jo-Ann's whistle lay flat on the air. And before Dale could go to her, she rode among them. She stared at the five men.

"Friends of mine," said Dale quickly. "George Parker, Harvey Logan, Harry Longabaugh, Ben Kilpatrick an' Mr. Merino."

The true names of the Wild Bunch members escaped her. She nodded to each in turn and handed Dale the bell and throat strap. Then he said, "Go home now. Say nothing to Chris. Your troubles are over."

Tears came to make her eyes starry, and right in front of the Bunch she leaned down from her saddle and kissed Dale full on the lips. Her mouth wasn't hard and creased now, but soft and yielding.

"Little Dale Salvon will be proud to hear about this when he's old enough to understand," she murmured huskily.

Then she was roweling her horse and leaping away. Dale Salvon! She had named her child after him. That was payment enough for what he was doing. He couldn't let his namesake down!

He turned back to the Bunch. Their heads were turned away, their faces sober as if they were remembering when such a goodbye had been accorded them. . . .

NIGHT came on with typical mountain suddenness. And when the shadows had become solid pools of gloom, Dale said gruffly, "It's time!"

In the saddles, they edged to the rim of the canyon that was holding the stolen Box M cattle. For several seconds they listened to Butch's terse instructions. Before he gave the signal to take their stations, the Wild Bunch leader's hand came to rest on Dale's arm.

"It's a long shot, kid," he said. "You'll have tuh ride it through until they scatter. God willin' . . . I'll be there."

Dale nodded solemnly and tore a piece from his neckerchief to tie up the clapper of the bell. Then they split up and moved into the shadows.

Dale quit his mount at the lip of the canyon and turned it over to Merino. He made his way gingerly down the slope. He could hear the buzz of conversation set up by the Cooper renegades and he could make out Fent's heavy tones. His teeth set tight as he came to the corral-fence.

He slipped inside and crouched tensely. Careful of any waste motion that would excite the herd, he dared the side of a steer. Swiftly, he fastened the belt about the animal's neck. Then he was leaping astride, using the belt as a surcingle, to keep from being gored. He jerked the cloth from the bell clapper and screamed shrilly. Kilpatrick should have the gate open by now.

With a thunderous roar, the herd milled. The steer sunfished under Dale and squealed its fright.

Pencils of flame spurted from the canyon wall as the Wild Bunch guns spoke. Dale fought grimly amid the bedlam. He was aware of answering shots as the renegades broke and ran. Either side of him was a writhing mass of bumping backs. Horns clicked on horns, and his legs were

crushed against his plunging brute as the herd ran blindly.

Then the cattle were streaking onto the plain, spreading in their lumbering way into the hills and coulees.

The pound of hoofs sounded behind him. Cassidy rolled out of the dust and sided him. His massive arm shot out and Dale swept to him. Then Butch was using his superb riding knowledge.

The plain erupted in a sheet of flame as Sheriff Mulford's posse went to work. The dark forms of outlaws wilted down. As Dale and Butch paused to watch the carnage out there amid the starglow, the rest of the Bunch rode up.

At a motion from Butch, Dale swung into his own saddle and they raced into the hills. On a rise, they stopped and looked back. It was wipe-out down there, and all was quiet now except for the muted tolling of a cowbell—death knell for the Cooper renegades.

Against the rising moon in the east a dust cloud rose. That would be Chris Salvon and his punchers driving Cooper cattle in a legitimate deal. And tonight stolen stock wouldn't be stamped from Crazy Woman's Canyon so Cooper could make the charge that Chris Salvon had stolen both Cooper stock and Box M. Cooper lay dead out there on the plain—victim of his own cunning. By the time Chris arrived, the land would be locked in silence. He would continue on his stolid way—back to Jo-Ann and little Dale.

Butch's hand found Dale's shoulder. "It's different out here, kid," he said.

Dale nodded solemnly. "We're a different breed," he answered softly. "An' I'm satisfied." He was thinking of that spontaneous kiss—and of Little Dale, who would be proud when he was old enough to understand. . . .

GUN-DOCTOR'S DEATH CURE

*The roar of triggered lead
rocked the cabin. But Kelso
hadn't fired.*



By NORMAN A. FOX

The years brought a home, a son and the respect of his fellow townsmen—an honest man's reward—to Doc Guthrie, dark-trail veteran. . . . Then bandit bullets drove him back to his inescapable past—for a bargain with Death, to salvage one life from the wreckage of his counterfeit career!

ONE shadow moved, ever so slightly, in the darkness that shrouded the porch. Doc Guthrie glimpsed it as he mounted the steps to his little home, and his hand groped beneath the long black

coat he wore. But no reassuring sixgun met his fingers. The medico shrugged, dropped his hand to his side. Funny, he found time to reflect, how habit would ride a man after all these years. In the

face of menace, he had instinctively reached for the weapon he had long since ceased to carry.

The shadow detached itself, moved forward, became a slouching, stubble-faced man. The moon sprayed through the network of vines that canopied the porch, glinted on a leveled gun.

The man spoke. "That your medicine bag tied to your saddlehorn, Doc?" He gestured toward the roan Guthrie had left at the gate. "I got a patchin' job for you that's got to be done pronto."

Doc Guthrie carried his fifty-odd years with stalwart grace. His tall, lean figure stiffened, and an unnatural hardness tensed his strangely youthful face. He recognized this rat-like man before him, recognized him from conversations of Van Guthrie, his son, who had talked much about the outlaw band that Sheriff Jigger Slade and his deputies had been attempting to round up for the past month.

The man's words worried Doc Guthrie. Young Van was out on the trail tonight. Someone had been wounded. And that spelled gun-play.

"You're Yakima Kelso," the medico said quietly. "I'm not the man you want. The folks around Kirby call me doctor by courtesy because I've made myself useful helping Doc Williams a few times. I have instruments and I can use 'em in a pinch, but if you really need a doctor you'd better get Williams. He is one."

He spoke the truth. In the range country a man was more likely to be judged by his ability than his qualifications. Consequently Guthrie was accepted as a doctor by the townspeople of Kirby.

Kelso sneered. "Doc Williams might not cater to the idea of patchin' up an owl-hooter. You ain't gonna be so particular."

Doc fingered the watch-chain that crossed his vest. "Why not?" he asked.

"Because there's a certain deputy, name of Van Guthrie, that left his posse in order to work alone. Right smart hombre,

that kid. Folks is sayin' he's a cinch for the sheriff's job when Jigger Slade resigns next month. Maybe so. I wouldn't be bettin' on it if his dad should get stubborn-like and kick about doin' a piece of work for us."

"Talk," Doc reflected, "is cheap." But he felt his veins chill.

Kelso's free hand slipped inside a checkered shirt-front. Face grin-split, the outlaw extended a glittering spur.

"I borrowed this from a gent who's stayin' with us awhile," he purred. "Recognize it?"

Doc did. "And if I do your work?" he asked, without a trace of his emotion.

"You and that sneakin' badge-toter go free," Kelso promised.

"Let's be riding," Doc said.

THE cottage that housed father and son stood at Kirby's outskirts, apart from other dwellings. Yakima Kelso led his own horse from the far side of the building, slapped the older man for a hide-out gun and ordered him to mount. Together the two headed toward the dark blotches smeared against the eastern horizon, foothills of the far-flung Little Belts.

The moon rode high, showering the prairie with a day-like luminosity, turning sage brush and bunch grass into weird, bewildering shadows. The night breeze slapped Doc's face as he rode slightly ahead of his companion. He could feel the outlaw's eyes boring his back, and the medico thrilled to the silent menace. He smiled, wondering what Kelso would think if he knew that Kirby's respectable Doc Guthrie had taken many such rides in the long ago, and of his own volition.

But Kelso couldn't know that the man called Doc Guthrie had ridden the owl-hoot a quarter of a century before, and that even in his wild, young days his aptitude for healing had given him a reputation. No man in this section knew that. Nor did anyone know that Doc had spent

three years in the hell-hole of Yuma Prison, three years that had burned all lawlessness out of him. That lay far behind, a part of his life that Doc had long since put out of his memory, preferring to forget.

But now this moon-washed night-ride was bringing it all back to him. And with the reminiscences, came a disquieting thought. Would any of the outlaws who waited at trail's end know him? He had always avoided Kirby's jail-house, even after his son became a deputy, because he feared that someday a rider from his own past might be lodged there. These outlaws had ridden a murder trail from the South, Van had told him . . . Texas lay to the south, and New Mexico, and Arizona—with its blistering Yuma.

He shrugged such thoughts aside as they threaded a winding coulee that bored back into the foothills. Twenty-five years is a long time. The outlaws of his day were dead, most of them, or vanished to lands beyond the law.

They were almost at the door of a little cabin nestled in a pocket of the coulee's wall before Doc's ready eyes noticed the place. Kelso swung from his saddle.

"Get your case and unload, Doc," he grunted. "And no funny business."

The outlaw tapped lightly on the door, named himself in response to a cautious inquiry from within. Hinges creaked, and Doc walked inside, ahead of Kelso.

The medico blinked in the glare of a kerosene lamp that sat upon a table in the middle of the single room. Van was there, lashed to a chair near one wall. The boy had the same tall, supple build of Doc, but the similarity ended there. Features, broad and rugged, in contrast to his father's lean, sensitive face, were twisted in anger.

Two men paced the room, slinky-eyed men; one was tall and lean, the other short and rotund. Both were stamped with the markings of the dim trails, the brands of killers. These would be Tonto Harrigan

and Stubby Dwyer, Doc decided, recalling Van's descriptions.

A crude bunk shared honors with the table, Van's chair, and a smoking range, as the only furniture of the room. Doc's eyes wandered, rested on a big man who sprawled in a tangle of blankets. And Doc repressed a start at the sight.

The man had been wounded in the head. His face was a smear of blood, his eyes closed. But Doc knew him. That craggy jaw and crumpled nose were as familiar as though twenty-five minutes rather than as many years had passed since he had seen that face. Rory Masters, the reward posters called him. Doc knew him by another name, but that didn't matter. What counted was that his fears had been well founded. At long last a man had come who would remember Doc Guthrie from the owl-hoot. And the medico knew, with bitterness, that he himself had changed less than this man had.

His face masked his mingled emotions as he turned quiet eyes on Van. "How did they get you, son?" he asked.

"It was my own damn-fool fault" the boy confessed ruefully. "We herded these snakes into the coulee. The posse split, figgering they'd come out at one of two places. Me, I tailed them into the coulee, to make sure they didn't turn back. They jumped me from the bushes, clubbed me off my hoss." His mouth tightened. "I got Masters first," he added, "and I'm just regretin' that I didn't kill him. They'd heard my dad was a sawbones, so they decided to keep me alive till they got you."

"Save the talk," Kelso ordered gruffly. "You've got work to do, Doc."

DOC nodded, his mind busy digesting his son's story. He knew the country. These men didn't. Van's words had given him important information, telling him indirectly that the posse had ridden a short-cut trail that would intersect the coulee at two points. When they found no quarry

at trail's end, they would move back down the ravine. The ride would take hours, but they were bound to arrive at the cabin before morning. Doc's cue was to stall for time.

And he wanted to stall, desperately. Restoring that bleeding hulk on the bunk to consciousness would spell disaster for himself. If Masters lived to escape, he would spread the news that the father of Kirby's prize deputy was an ex-owlhooter and an ex-convict. If Masters were captured, the story would still be told. Yet refusing to aid the wounded man would spell immediate doom for himself—and for Van.

"Get movin'," Stubby Dwyer urged.

"Don't do it, Dad," Van flared. "It won't help none. They've got it in for me. No matter what happens to Masters, it'll be the finish for both of us. Let him die."

"Button your lip, badge-toter," Kelso snarled and turning, faced Doc. "I made you a bargain back in town," he reminded.

Doc shrugged. Some men rode the owlhoot whose word was as good as a green-back. But the man who called himself Rory Masters wasn't that type and neither was Kelso. It was a devil's bargain, at best. Doc knew that, but he opened his case, spread instruments upon the table and moved the lamp closer.

"Dad! Anything they could do to me would be easier than watchin' you patch up an outlaw," Van said, and his voice was steely, the words hard and slow. "Can't you understand that?"

All three outlaws took menacing steps toward the bound figure, but Doc stopped them with a gesture. He studied his son's face, winced inwardly. It was going to hit the boy hard to hear the truth about his father. Why hadn't he told him of the past long ago? He had always intended to and had put it off, waiting, he told himself, for the years to give the boy that quality that tempers justice with mercy. And Van had grown up hating outlaws, considering them all in a class with these men, car-

tion who killed to live, vultures of the rangeland.

"My patching an outlaw will give you another chance to catch that same gent—if Kelso keeps his word," Doc reminded the boy. He spoke to their captors. "I'll need hot water."

A pan simmered on the stove. Stubby Dwyer jerked a thumb toward it. "We figured yuh would," he said.

Doc took the pan to the little table, removed his coat, turned back his cuffs and began to work. With methodical swiftness, he washed the blood and grime from the face of the outlaw chief. This procedure bared the bullet wound that creased the man's face diagonally across the left cheekbone, a hideous gash that would scar Masters for life. Reaching for an instrument, Doc began to probe for the lead.

Silence shrouded the room. Van glared, sullen and tight-lipped. The three longriders stood rooted to the floor or paced noiselessly from window to window. Only groans from the unconscious man jarred the stillness as Doc's deft fingers did their work.

The task engrossed the medico. Absorbed in his work, he almost forgot his whereabouts, forgot that doom would mark the completion of the job. The lead defied all his efforts. Van must have fired from the ground, for the bullet had gone upward rather than inward. The lead seemed to be under the bone at the bridge of the man's nose. Doc would have been convinced that the pellet was lodged in the brain, except for the fact that Masters was still alive. He wished that Doc Williams, with his training and experience, were at his side.

When he became convinced that it would take a skill greater than his own to retrieve the lead, he gave up the task. Swabbing the wound with whiskey and carbolic, he reached for bandages. Masters would awaken in a few hours.

The bandage circled the outlaw's head,

covering the eyes as completely as a blind-fold. Doc smiled to himself as he fastened the cloth. If Masters recovered, the bandage would delay recognition for awhile anyway.

"That's all I can do for him," he told the three tense outlaws when he had finished. "I'm advising you to get him to a real doctor the first chance you have." He slid the table back. "We'll be leaving now."

Kelso grinned wolfishly. "You'll go when the chief sits up and says so," he said emphatically. "How do we know that you haven't fixed him so he'll never wake up?"

DOC silently seated himself on the edge of the bunk. He had expected that Kelso would continue to hold him, and he was prepared for a night-long vigil. The hours dragged by while Van dozed in the chair, the three paced, the wounded man groaned and muttered, and Doc waited.

With ears strained for the hoofbeats of the posse, the medico crouched in thought. Doom hovered close for him. If Masters recovered and removed the bandage, Doc would be exposed, shamed in the eyes of his son. And if Masters kept Kelso's bargain the way that Doc knew he would, the medico's fee would be paid in hot lead.

Morning was near when the man on the bunk groaned, cursed, made a feeble attempt to rise. Instantly Doc's hands, gentle but insistent, forced him back.

"Easy, man, easy," he cautioned. "Lie still."

The three darted close. "He's got to rest," Doc explained patiently. "He's been hard hit."

Kelso's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Something tells me you're stringin' us, Doc," he muttered. "And if you are . . ."

Doc paid no heed to the unfinished threat. He groped beneath Masters' shirt, felt the strength of the man's heartbeat. He had done this before as a routine mat-

ter, but this time the result was satisfactory in more ways than one. Doc's hand had slipped farther down the patient's body than usual, and his fingers closed on a gun-butt. Masters carried a hideout gun, a gun that his companions didn't know about, for they hadn't moved it!

Doc got the gun from its hiding place and under his own vest, with a motion that would have done credit to a magician. Turning upon the outlaw trio, he probed their faces and knew that he had been undetected.

Masters stirred restlessly, hands reaching to claw at the bandage. Again the doctor stopped him.

"What the hell happened to me?" the wounded man muttered. He sank back weakly.

Kelso told him the complete story in short, clipped sentences.

The chief chuckled, touched his bandages gingerly. "So the badge-toter's old man fixed me up, huh?"

The man had changed very little, Doc reflected. His voice was the same, arrogant and grating. They hadn't cared for each other in the old days, he and Masters.

"I've done everything that I could for this man," Doc reminded Kelso. "How about freeing the kid and me?"

Kelso ignored him. "How do you feel now, chief?" he asked.

"Sorta weak," Masters replied. "Got a hell of a headache. But if the sawbones, is tired of seein' our faces I reckon we can accommodate him. And his kid, too!"

The way he said it warned Doc. The man had no intention of keeping the bargain, and his words were equivalent to a death warrant for the two Guthries. No mistaking the hidden meaning of those words! Doc saw that hideous grin splitting Kelso's face, saw the hands of the trio hovering over their holsters.

"Just a minute," he said quietly. "I came here with my eyes open, expecting what would happen. I'm asking one favor,

If you won't keep your bargain, keep half of it. Turn the kid loose and give him a horse."

"That would be right smart, wouldn't it?" Kelso sneered. "This here cabin is the best hideout in the Little Belts, and we aim to stay here. That man-hunting son of yours would have a posse on us in an hour. There's only one way to take care of our skins. Salivate the two of you!"

"You sneaking double-crossin' rats!" Van blazed from his chair. "My dad dragged your pole-cat chief back from his grave."

"Badge-toter," Kelso grated, "there's somethin' that I've been itchin' to do since the first time I spotted your face. I couldn't risk doin' it while your old man was workin' on Rory, but there's nothin' to stop me now. I'm gonna load your belly full of lead!"

His hand jerked, a gun glittered in the lamplight. The roar of triggered lead rocked the cabin. But Kelso hadn't fired. He stood in the center of the room, dazed, one hand clutching a useless gun arm. Smoke billowed lazily from Masters' hide-out-gun in the hand of Doc Guthrie.

LUCK had been with the medico, and he knew it. He hadn't handled a gun in two dozen years. Small chance that the fates would favor him so well when Harrigan and Dwyer went into action. And the two were going into action—fast. Doc raised a booted foot, kicked at the table. It crashed over, smashing the lamp into flying pieces.

The moon, settling toward the West, gleamed through a window, threw a golden path across the floor that split the sudden darkness. Guns exploded like dynamite charges in that confined space, the flashes searing the gloom. Men had become shoving, cursing shadows who could not tell friend from foe.

Avoiding the moonlight, Doc leaped to one side, clutching Masters' gun. Two

bodies crashed together at the spot where he had stood. A gun roared but did not flame, for it was pressed close to the side of a man.

"I finished the doc," Tonto Harrigan grunted triumphantly.

And a choking voice answered him, "Yuh—got me—instead." Stubby Dwyer sobbed—and died.

Reversing his gun, Doc clubbed blindly in the dark. Harrigan groaned, slumped to the floor, unconscious and out of the battle. Doc slid away quietly. A boot scraped somewhere across the room. That would be Yakima Kelso—with one good arm and one good gun. The outlaw had adopted caution. Doc sensed that he wasn't going to plunge about in the dark, foolishly, as his companions had. Doc, straining his eyes, had a feeling that Kelso had marked him out, was moving closer with deadly precision. The medico stood undecided, in silence, nerves tense.

Then Van's voice shrieked out, "Look out, Dad!"

A chair fell over with a crash. Another crash followed it so quickly as to be almost simultaneous. Understanding lanced through Doc's brain. The kid had lunged forward, dumping his chair, and Kelso had sprawled over the obstacle.

"Jump him, Dad—quick!" Van yelled.

Doc leaped across the room. His groping hands felt the head of the outlaw, who struggled to rise, cursing viciously as he put his weight on his wounded arm. The medico raised the gun-butt, brought it down. He panted triumphantly as the outlaw relaxed across Van and the wrecked chair. The battle was over.

No, not quite over . . . Something moved in the vicinity of the bunk. Doc spun, saw a form stagger into the path of the moonlight. Masters stood helplessly bewildered, reeling unsteadily on his feet.

"Yakima!" he moaned, panic tingeing his voice. "Tonto! Stubby!"

Doc stepped into the light, with the gun

ready in his hand, and faced Masters. The outlaw chief plucked at the blinding bandage, tore with feverish fingers to loosen it. The sixgun seemed to sear Doc's hand. It would be so easy to shoot this man down—and so justifiable. Nobody would question the details of a battle of one against four. One squeeze of the trigger, and the man who called himself Rory Masters would never tell what he knew about the man who called himself Doc Guthrie.

CLOTH ripped like the crack of doom as Masters snatched the bandage away, opened his eyes. Face contorted, he glared wildly, lunged straight for the medico. In that moment, temptation rode Doc hard. Then, as Masters almost reeled into his arms, a wave of self-revulsion swept the medico. It would be easier to have Van and all of Kirby know the truth than to take advantage of this wounded man. He dropped his gun hand, shoved Masters hard with his left, back into the bunk.

Afterwards, Doc had only a dim recollection of freeing Van. He remembered the boy pawing him, asking over and over if he were hurt. They cut up the rope that had bound the deputy, and used the pieces to lash the hands of the three unconscious men. It seemed to Doc that they had hardly completed the task when hoofbeats were heard and grizzled Jigger Slade and his posse burst through the cabin door.

Explanations were demanded. Van did most of the talking. Someone found a candle, got it alight. Men wrung Doc's hand, pounded Van upon the back. Then Van followed the doctor outside.

"You'll be riding in with your posse," Doc told the boy. "I'll be waiting at home for you, son. Have Doc Williams take a look at Masters when you get back."

The black of night was dissolving into a riot of color in the east when Doc walked the roan across the prairie toward

Kirby. Sunrise had chased the shadows from the porch when he reached his cottage. But menace still lingered close—

Masters had seen his face. Masters would remember him. If recognition hadn't been complete, memory would stir itself alive as the outlaw sat in Kirby's jail, waiting trial.

He was sitting on the porch, a solitary figure, trying to think things out, when Van loped down the street, joined him. The son squatted beside his father.

"They're saying down at the jail-house that this deal cinches me for the sheriff's job," the boy announced at last. "Your work is the cause of it, Dad. Like father, like son, they're sayin'."

Doc winced. "How's Masters?" he ventured. "What does he save to say?"

"Nothing," the boy drawled slowly. Turning, he faced his father. "Dad," he said, "I learned how to feel sorry for an outlaw this morning—even a snake like this Rory Masters."

"Yes?" Doc invited.

"Killing a man happens to be part of my job, sometimes. I tried to kill Masters last night. But I'd rather turn in my badge than harm another man the way I hurt him. I had Doc Williams look at him like you asked me to, Dad. Rory Masters will never see the rope that'll hang him. He's blind, Dad, stone blind."

"Blind?" Doc echoed.

"It was a freak shot, according to Doc Williams. A bit further, and it would have gone into his brain, killed him. As it was, it sheared the optic nerve. He'll never see again—poor devil."

The sun burst free of the eastern horizon, glinted on the rooftops of Kirby. A new day . . . Doc Guthrie watched the sunrise, sitting silently beside his boy. It wouldn't be so hard now to tell the kid his story, Doc reflected. Van had found that quality that tempers justice with mercy. Van would make a good sheriff for Kirby.

BIVOUAC OF PRAIRIE DOOM

By Colonel George
Brydges Rodney



"Enemy in sight!" was the signal of the C Company scout ahead. . . . And Corporal Keller, under arrest, took command, adding rebellion to his list of army-rule infractions—to teach an arrogant greenhorn shavetail the frontier's final lesson in fighting courage!

CORPORAL Michael Keller, Second Cavalry, was deliberately casual in finishing his drink. His name had been spoken directly behind him, but he didn't have to look around to know the owner of that edged, icy voice. With the drink down, he faced about. His manner was coldly formal as his hand

snapped up in a regulation salute.

"Yes, sir?" he said tentatively.

"You're decidedly out of place in a bar which officers frequent." Second Lieutenant Howard Sauls, most recently joined 'shavetail' in the Second Cavalry, looked Keller over. "Furthermore, I directed you to see the quartermaster and

Novelette of a Texas death troop's rebel corporal



His bullets covered their retreat as he shoved them back to the doorway.

get a pair of fresh lead mules for the trip back to Palo. Have you done it?"

"I have, sir. The mules are hitched in and the men saddled up. We can pull out for Palo just as soon as the lieutenant gives the word."

"Like hell we can!" said Sauls wrathfully. "I have just inspected those mules.

They're not fit to travel. One of 'ems in foal."

Corporal Keller looked at him. He wondered if the man could be joking. Even at West Point, a man must have learned that a mule in foal is a biological impossibility. There was not the slightest twinkle of mirth in the lieutenant's eyes.

There was only concern and some wrath.

"It's pretty evident to me that you don't know your business," said Sauls wrathfully. "And to cap it all, I find you loafing in a bar that is the resort of officers, while you let your detail go to hell in your absence. Leave this bar at once and don't let me catch you here again. I have received the pay for the command and it's been packed in the ambulance. The moment the Rockport stage gets in with Miss Bent and Mrs. Jervej, we will leave. That should be in about an hour. That's all."

Corporal Keller red in the face with his effort to suppress his mingled feelings, saluted and left the San Antonio hotel bar. A red-faced rancher withdrew his nose from a ten-inch julep. He looked up at the young lieutenant and said, "Did I heah you say, suh, that you have a mule in foal?"

"I have, thanks to my fool of a corporal," said Lieutenant Sauls importantly. "I came from Fort Balo with a detail to get pay for the command and to escort two women back to the post. I told my corporal to get two fresh mules from the quartermaster and I find one of them is with foal. I don't know what to do."

"Huh. My name's Iles. Effen I was you, know what I'd do? I'd sure as hell put that 'ere mule in a side-show. Nobody ever seen a mule in foal. Now there was one man spent two seasons waitin' fer wool to grow on a hydraulic ram. He's in a private home now, cuttin' out paper dolls with scissors that ain't got any points. They won't let him have nothin' sharp." Iles thrust his red nose deep into his julep.

For a long moment Lieutenant Sauls stared at him. Then the hideous truth sank in. Himself but three months out of the 'Point,' an honor graduate therefrom, he had made an utter and complete fool of himself before the man of all others he frankly disliked.

SAULS' dislike for Corporal Keller had started the day he joined the Second Cavalry. He found in C Company that the junior corporal had enlisted to win a commission. The fact that Michael Keller was the son of that doughty old fighter, Captain Keller, who had been killed at Buena Vista when he led his dragoons in his famous charge against a Mexican regiment, meant nothing to Howard Sauls. Nor was he concerned with the fact that Michael Keller had vainly striven for an appointment to West Point.

Sauls felt that the commissioned grades in the Army should be open only to graduates of the Military Academy and he frankly said so. Also, perhaps he resented the fact that while he himself spent four years at laborious studies, Keller had been learning his business in the most gruelling school in the world—a cavalry regiment on frontier service in Indian country. Old Kiowa Steve, Chief of Scouts, had been Keller's teacher, and Kiowa happened to like him.

Like oil on the first flames of Sauls' dislike, had been his captain's words: "You talk too damned much, youngster. The regiment likes Keller—first for his father's sake, also for his own. He knows his business. The pipe-clay's in his marrow."

If Michael Keller knew what his lieutenant thought, he kept the knowledge to himself. He maintained a close mouth, and even that seemed to irritate Sauls.

Sauls paused in the door of the bar-room and glanced over at the big corral before The Alamo, which even then was a national shrine. In that corral a score of shaggy camels bubbled and squealed and stank. They were the last word of the War Department. In an effort to solve transportation problems in the great American Desert, the department had brought them over from Africa a month before. They now waited shipment to distant posts, and a score of grum-

bling soldiers cursed the smelly beasts.

Sauls flushed as he saw Keller standing by the corral, talking to the old rancher who had laid bare that mistake about the mule. Iles was gleefully reporting his conversation at the bar.

"He tells me he's got a mule in foal. Gawda mighty! He's an officer of cavalry, at that! You from Fort Palo, eh? You got old Kiowa Steve up there? Can't he teach yore shavetails about mules? I'd admire to have the new commandin' officer of the Second Cavalry hear that. . . . Who? I said the new commandin' officer, meanin' Colonel Lee How do I know? Lordy, man! We hear all things here. I was in the Army once myself. Fit under Quitman in Mexico. I knowed just two soldiers I'd give my hide fer. One is this here Colonel Lee. He saved my life at Churubusco. The other was a dragoon officer, name of Keller. Captain, he was. . . ."

"My father," said Keller, flushing.

Iles grinned at him. "I half-guessed it when I heard the shavetail snap out your name. If I'd ha' knowed for sure, I'd have bought the drinks. He was killed at Buena Vista chargin' a battery. This here Colonel Lee You know him?"

"No, sir. The regiment is split up between several small posts. I've never seen the colonel. He's at Fort Belknap now."

"Comin' down here to take command," said Iles. "I got the word from my daughter's husband's cousin. He works in the corral with them damn camels. . . . Hi!" he said suddenly. "Here comes the stage."

A cloud of red dust whirled down the crooked street, a raucous shout swung to the dusty sky, and the Rockport stage was in.

Michael Keller was suddenly aware of a girl who swung out of that stage, smiling on a world that smiled back in perfect sympathy. At sight of Keller in his natty cavalry uniform, her eyes widened; then

she flung forward with both hands outstretched. Five years before, girl and boy had been such friends as are only made in remote army posts; then an Eastern school had claimed the girl. Ignorant of this, Lieutenant Sauls pressed forward and caught her words.

"Michael! Mike—Michael Keller!" She almost sang the words. "They told me you had enlisted to win a commission."

Twenty-three can not be formal with twenty-one that is obviously delighted. Mrs. Jervey, wife of gray-bearded old Sergeant-major Jervey out at Palo, stood frankly aghast. A captain's daughter should know better than to shake hands so warmly with an enlisted man. Lieutenant Sauls thought so too, and had no intention of being shouldered into the pawn row.

He turned on Corporal Keller, but spoke to Margaret. "I fear you must excuse Corporal Keller just now," he said. "I am Lieutenant Sauls, Miss Bent, and I have come to take you out to Fort Palo. If you will give me the checks for your baggage. . . ."

She passed them to him, and he handed them casually to Keller. "Load these trunks at once, Corporal. See to it yourself."

KELLER stared at him for a moment, and a quick flush ran up his face. A little stain of color touched Margaret Bent's cheeks. She sensed the antagonism between the two, and stood like a statue while personal desire fought against the iron discipline of the Second Cavalry. The latter won.

Foster, civilian driver of the ambulance, who heard and understood, sat like a man frozen. The eyes of the soldiers of the detail focussed on Keller. They had heard every word. Keller calmly saluted, stepped back and handed the tickets to a Mexican and tossed him a coin.

- "*Cuida los baules, hombre,*" he said. "See to the trunks."

Sauls whirled on his corporal. "Did you understand my order?" he demanded in a frozen tone.

"I did, sir. With all respect, Lieutenant, I must remind you, sir, that I am a soldier, not a baggage hand. My duties are purely military. I am a soldier."

"By God," said Sauls, "You're a rotten one! When we get back to Palo we'll see what a general court has to say about this." But Sauls turned away, and Margaret flashed an understanding glance at Keller.

"Stuff's loaded, Lieutenant," said Foster curtly. "We can pull out when you say."

Sauls turned from helping the two women into the ambulance, caught his bridle and swung into the saddle.

"You men fall in behind the ambulance," he called. "All right, driver! Hit the trail!"

That trail led westward over a land that even yet was wild. The huisache in full bloom filled the air with fragrance, desert candles reached high into the air, and every flat was covered with flowers that neither woman had ever seen before. But it was heavy travel, and Sauls kept his men bunched behind the ambulance, which traveled at a rate of something less than five miles an hour, a pace that murders cavalry. Sauls' main thought was for the flimsy iron box that held seven thousand dollars of federal funds. If anything should happen to that money it would cost him his commission.

Once Keller ventured a suggestion that one or two men should be thrown to the front, but he was met with an instant rebuff from his superior officer.

"When I want any suggestion from you, Corporal Keller, I'll let you know. In the meantime. . . ."

"Yonder comes some outfit down the road, sir," said Keller quickly. "A man.

He's ridin' hell-for-leather, sir, too!" His quick eyes had picked up a distant dust-cloud.

A heavy, dilapidated wagon drawn by a mule and an Indian pony rocketed down the rough track. Two women, one clutching a baby, jolted on a board seat, while a fourteen-year-old boy flogged the crazy team. Behind the wagon a hatless man rode a barebacked pony, a single-barreled shotgun across his arm. The wagon stopped and the man slid from the pony.

"Name's Est," he said through a mouthful of dust. "You-all better turn back, Lieutenant. Hell's broke loose to the West. The Comanches is out. They raided Dry Valley an' killed three prospectors. Blake left his ranch, 'cause he dassent stay. It's a big bunch, they say. Troops is out from San Saba an' Fort Stockton an'—"

"What bunch is it?" asked Keller quickly.

Sauls cut in impatiently. "Don't be a fool, Corporal. What difference can it make what bunch it is?"

"Sir, I've trailed most of 'em with old Kiowa Steve up at Palo. That was before you joined the regiment. There's five bunches of the Comanches—the Sugar-eaters, the Root-eaters, the Buffalo-eaters, the Men Who Run in a Circle, and the Antelope band. That last is best armed. They've got as good rifles as we have. If it's the Antelope band, it means big trouble."

"Blake says it's the Antelope bunch," said Est. "You'd better git back to San-tone. D'you reckon I'd ha' left my place lessen I had to? You're a damn fool efen you go on."

Sauls laughed. "Stop because a half dozen naked Indians jump a reservation? Not me. I've got the pay for the command an'. . . Damn it all Foster! Start those mules," he shouted.

Keller drew his horse aside. "My horse

has picked up a stone, sir," he said. "I'll catch up in a few yards."

Sauls nodded, lifted his horse with the spur and passed on to reassure Margaret.

Keller motioned Est to wait. "Get in to San Antonio, Est, as quickly as you can," he said curtly. "There're only a few soldiers there, but tell 'em to send a party out to follow us at once. Savvy?"

Est nodded.

"Tell 'em to take no chances. Tell 'em the lieutenant—"

"I'll tell 'em the lieutenant's a damned fool," said Est hotly. "An' damned fools don't live long out here. . . . What d'you want me to tell 'em?"

Keller suddenly remembered what the man Iles had told him: that the new commanding officer for San Antonio was on his way from Fort Belknap.

"Tell 'em Colonel Lee is on his way from Fort Belknap," he said. "Tell 'em that a band of the Antelope Comanches are on the wartrail. And try to get them to send out troops at once—to the Blake ranch at least. They haven't got many troops in Santone—no cavalry—but they've got that camel company that's on its way to Bandera. Tell 'em to come as fast as they can. . . . Be sure about it."

He swung into saddle and spurred up-trail as Est pushed his pony into a gallop to overtake his wagon.

CHAPTER TWO

Enemy in Sight

LATE in the afternoon Est's abandoned ranchhouse heaved up against the sky-line, a two-room house built of adobe and small cottonwood logs chinked with clay. The place was in complete disorder, for Est had stood on no ceremony in his departure. A heavy table on three legs was covered with flour, where a sack had broken; beans were scattered like small-shot on the floor and a few torn

garments were strewn about the floor.

"We'll spend the night here," Sauls announced. "We'll have to fix up a place for the women to sleep. We'll leave at daylight."

The house stood in the center of an acre of good grass, along the edge of which Est had dug an irrigating ditch from a spring on the hillside. Keller walked toward that ditch, and presently Felton saw him stop, stoop and examine the ground at his feet. Then he walked on to the ditch, bent over it, rose and beckoned Felton, who joined him.

For a space of ten feet the banks of the ditch had been broken down and the prints of horses' feet showed in the soft mud.

"Well?" Felton looked at him inquiringly. "I see nothin'. Est's horse trampled the ditch in crossin' it. What's eatin' yuh?"

"Est's pony was shod in front," said Keller. "These hoofprints were made by bare-footed ponies—and a lot of 'em, too."

He glanced about, went to a clump of small cottonwoods and swept some small object from the ground into the palm of his hand.

"What you got there?" demanded Felton.

Keller held out a hand in which lay a little chunk of half-chewed meat, at sight of which Felton gave a low whistle. It was a lump of pemmican, the meat that Indians use when on wartrails.

"D'you reckon them damned Comanches have been here ahead of us?" asked Felton.

"I know damned well they have. Do white men eat pemmican? They got here just after Est left, otherwise he'd have seen them. They found the house empty and looted it. Est would never have wasted goob grub by throwin' it on the floor. This meat is still damp. They were here not more'n three hours ago."

"Kiowa Steve'll give you a medal," jeered Felton. "Better tell the General." And he motioned to Sauls, standing by the ambulance.

The lieutenant glanced up at sight of the two men, and came over. Keller told him what he had seen and held out the lump of meat. Sauls examined it curiously and tossed it scornfully aside.

"Bosh!" he said. "If a war party of Comanches was here three or four hours ago, where are they now? Comanches don't vanish into thin air. You needn't worry, Corporal. Est broke down that ditch, and probably one of his kids spit out the meat you found. Don't get stampeded."

For a split-second Michael Keller's eyes contracted as he stared at his officer.

After supper he got a shovel and was about to cover the fire, when Sauls stopped him.

"Leave that fire burning, Corporal," he said. "The Lord knows we need the comfort a campfire can give us."

"Lieutenant"—Keller's voice was steelily—"I tell you a bunch of Comanches has been here—a war party. They were here not more than four hours ago. Est himself warned you. You've got two women with us . . . We've got six men, in all. If you'll take my advice—"

At that, Sauls lost what was left of his temper.

"I place you in arrest here and now!" he snapped. "When we get back to Fort Palo, you'll go before a general court."

But he did not re-ignite the fire.

They pulled out at daylight. It was gray and murky, with a heavy wind whirling the tumbleweed clumps along the track.

Once Margaret thrust her head through the curtains to call to Keller, but Sauls rode up alongside.

"I will have to request you to hold no communication with Corporal Keller, Miss Bent," he said. "I have had to place

him in arrest for disrespect and insubordination."

Margaret's eyes grew big at that and Mrs. Jervy's mouth settled into a prim line, as her hand found Margaret's arm in silent pressure. Sure instinct warned her that any sympathy from Margaret would only make matters worse.

They plodded on through the growing heat. Warned by his men's mutterings, Sauls sent out two men, one on each flank. He himself rode by the ambulance, trying to talk with Margaret, whose response was cool and curt.

"Where do we spend the night?" she asked finally.

"Blake's rancho," said Sauls. "It's about six miles farther on. Tomorrow night we'll be in Fort Palo. When we strike Blake's place, you'll see what a scare-head your friend the corporal is. He doesn't seem fit to groom a horse, much less to hold a commission . . . Hello! What's that?"

Lieutenant Sauls reined his horse out of his own dust-cloud, to stare at Akers, far out to the right front. Akers held his rifle above his head and was riding his horse crazily in a figure-of-eight about a mesquite bush.

"Look, Lieutenant!" Keller's voice rose above the tramp of the mules, the jingle of the trace-chains and the clatter of the heavy ambulance.

Sauls looked again and his heart sank. No man could serve for two days with a cavalry force in Indian country without knowing what that signal meant. A rifle above a man's head and a horse ridden in a figure-of-eight meant only one thing: "Enemy in sight."

"Come with me, Corporal!" snapped Sauls.

KELLER'S arrest was forgotten. Sauls sank his spurs to the rowel-seats in his horse's flanks and sent the animal lumbering across the flat.

Akers jerked his foaming horse to a halt and pointed to a moving dust-cloud out to his right front. "There's a bunch of riders out there, sir," he said.

"Hell! Don't get stampeded," said Sauls lightly. "It's cattle huntin' water."

"Cattle don't hunt water this time of day, Lieutenant," said Keller curtly. "A high, thin cloud of dust like that means mounted men, comin' fast. We'd better head in for Blake's ranch quickly, sir. If that dust covers Comanches, we're in a hell of a fix."

Sauls whirled his horse and waved Foster to get the ambulance ahead. The mules threw themselves into their collars and Foster turned them into the rough track.

Two miles beyond, a short distance off the main trail, Blake's rancho would provide a welcome refuge if it were needed.

That dust-cloud had been seen by all. It moved swiftly to cut the main trail between the ranchhouse and the ambulance. At sight of that maneuver, Sauls acted—at last.

"Head for the house!" he shouted, and there was a timbre in his voice that made men spring into resistless action. "Push those mules into a gallop, Foster. There may be trouble here!"

"May be! Maybe hell!" Keller jerked a gauntleted hand at that edge of dust. The cloud seemed to blow aside at his words. And there, three-quarters of a mile away, traveling at a run, came a war party of Comanches in all their glory—horses bay and pintado and gray and black, war-bonnets flutter and lances flashing in the sunlight.

The ranchhouse lay straight ahead, a brown blur on the yellow plain. That war party was coming in on their flank at a gallop. One leap of Keller's frantic horse took him alongside the front wheel of the ambulance.

"Pour leather into 'em!" he shouted.

"Give 'em hell, Foster! You've got to beat 'em to the house!"

The four mules leaped as one. The traces creaked and strained as Foster urged his team to run yet faster. The ambulance swung from side to side and the two women clutched each other as they were rocketed toward the house. Three hundred yards to go!

Keller jerked loose his halter-shank and flogged the lead-mules till blood dripped from the lash. A quick order over his shoulder warned the men to be ready to dismount at a word.

Then the heavy ambulance crashed into the open space before the house, slid on two wheels across the sun-browned gravel and jerked to a halt. The women were thrown to the floor by the sudden stop.

Keller wrenched open the ambulance door, jerked the two women out. His bullets covered their retreat as he shoved them back to the doorway.

"Get the canteens!" he shouted to Foster. "We'll need 'em. You men take interval . . . Quick!"

The patter and thunder of a hundred hoofs warned them of the oncoming line. Sauls, whose brain seemed atrophied, was suddenly aware of four men kneeling in the dirt and of Keller standing behind them, alert and confident.

"From the right, two men fire at a time . . . Then load as quick as you can. We must stop the first rush. Don't use your pistols till I tell you."

Two carbines blasted, and two ponies went down. No man could miss that line at less than sixty yards. The Indians' column swung wide and opened out to right and left. As they swerved, Keller shouted, "Inside the house with you! Quick! Two men cover the withdrawal."

THAT ranchhouse was a single room, about fifteen by thirty feet in size. The thick adobe walls gave perfect cover

from rifle fire. A half-barrel filled with stagnant water stood below a shelf and some garments hung on pegs in the walls. Four narrow windows high near the ceiling lighted the room.

Keller's quick gaze took in the place and lighted on the roof. It was sacaton, dry stalks of heavy grass that dries and burns like tinder.

He climbed up on a chair and looked out of a window. Thirty yards from the house a semi-globular oven stood in the open, and beyond that, lay an adobe-walled corral. Between the house and the oven an adobe-walled well with a long sweep told where Blake had got his water. Keller looked, swore and came back to Sauls.

"I'm in arrest, of course, Lieutenant," he said. "But, all the same, I value my life. We've got to punch some loop-holes in the walls. The windows are too high for rifles."

Foster seized an old pickaxe and set to work frantically on one wall. Keller climbed to a window on the eastern side.

"Good Lord!" he muttered. "There're forty of 'em if there's one."

He saw the Comanche ponies herded into the corral, where they would be safe from rifle fire, and he could glimpse an occasional war-bonnet lift and nod in the breeze above the corral wall. Long since, the ambulance and horses had disappeared, swallowed up in the chapparal. The house lay like a blister on a fever-smitten face.

"Mighty little water! No grub! Forty Comanches outside, and us with two women on our hands! . . . That's what I was afraid of."

He swore roundly as a spark rose from the corral. He knew what that meant! It was a fire-arrow that would set the sacaton roof ablaze. The arrow rose to the top of its arc, turned and dropped suddenly. With a vicious swishing sound, it landed on the roof.

Keller leaped for the table, piled two stools up on it, climbed to the roof, seized a handful of the smoldering sacaton and dragged the smoking mass inside the house.

Sauls grabbed up a bucket of water and dashed it over the flaming grass. Keller thrust him roughly aside.

"Don't waste that water," he growled. "We'll need every drop of it. Foster, climb to the eastern window and tell me what you see."

"Look here, Keller!" Sauls was furious. "You're taking too much on yourself. You're in arrest. I'm in command."

"Then for God's sake, command!" snapped Keller. It was no longer Lieutenant and Corporal. It was experienced trooper against inexperienced officer. "Someone's got to do something. If you don't, I'll have to."

He almost pushed the officer aside as he moved along the walls, examining each newly-made loop-hole. A sudden shriek from Margaret, crouching in a corner with Mrs. Jervey, made him turn quickly, to see Foster sliding from his seat in the window. He fell heavily to the floor, with a twenty-six inch arrow feathered in his neck.

Keller had seen arrow-wounds before. He dragged Foster aside, broke off the arrow head and withdrew the shaft. Then he snatched at a handkerchief to make a bandage, but before he got it free Foster's eyes turned up, a little quiver passed over him and he was gone. Akers bent to help with the body.

"That's the first. What now, Corporal?" he asked.

It was patent to all that the command had passed from Sauls to Keller. The men relied on him; Margaret and Mrs. Jervey watched him anxiously as he passed from loop-hole to door and back. He examined each man's belt, which carried twenty rounds apiece. Each heavy pistol held five shots, and each man had

ten extra pistol cartridges. It was little enough for a real fight.

A sudden banging roar from Akers' loop-hole drew Keller to his side.

"Got him!" Akers dropped his carbine-butt, snatched a cartridge from his box, bit it, rammed it home and set his steel ramrod on end at his side. "There they come, Corporal! On three sides!"

CHAPTER THREE

Red Night of Siege

FELTON, at an opposite loop-hole, fired swiftly and snatched an extra gun that Akers handed him. That band of Comanches broke on three sides and swarmed across the open in a wild rush. They knew that safety lay close to the walls, where the fire of the defenders was masked.

Three carbines took toll, and three men dropped. Then the line sullenly surged back.

The powder smoke billowed about the room, and the acrid fumes made them cough. Overhead a little hiss and a jet of gray smoke told that the roof was again afire. Keller leaped to the table.

Akers shrieked, snatching with both hands at his body. Then he spun around on both heels and dropped. A heavy bullet had raked him from side to side. Will power alone had kept him at his loop-hole, and when that attack gave back he collapsed. He tried to speak, and Margaret saw, as she bent over him with a gourd of dirty water, that he had bitten through his lip in his effort to conceal his pain. She caught his hands in hers, but shrank from his fierce grip.

"That's two gone, Lieutenant." Keller turned to Sauls, crouching at a loop-hole. "Will you take command, sir? It's not right for them to look to me when an officer's present."

"What you've done is all right," said Sauls, dully fingering the carbine that

Foster had dropped. Keller thought he knew what was passing through Sauls' mind, but he tried to be cheerful.

"We'll make it all right, Lieutenant," he said. "Those stampeded mules and horses of ours'll head straight for Fort Palo. Stampedin' stock always runs straight. We'll probably get relief in a few hours."

He decided against telling of the message that he had sent by Est. If they should be allowed to expect relief, and then it failed to appear, the reaction would be worse than if he said nothing. Est might never have reached San Antonio. Or the Camel Company might have already left by another trail for Bandera.

A shout from Jones drew him to the east side of the house. "They're gatherin' in that corral again, Corporal. It looks like they're pryin' a gatepost loose, only that don't make sense."

Keller knew what that meant and said so. Forty Indians could not remain long in one position. An Indian war party carries no supplies. It must forage or starve. Also there was always danger from pursuing white troops. Their only hope for a successful foray lay in a quick attack and a quicker retreat.

"They mean to use that post to try to break down the door," he said. "They'll not dare try it by daylight, while we can see to shoot. They'll try it at night, when we can't see. Looks damned queer to me. Comanches don't as a rule attack at night. We've got to hold 'em off."

He whirled at a startled scream that Margaret tried to stifle, and saw Lorton stagger back from his loop-hole, cursing shrilly, both hands clutching an Indian lance that stood a hands-breadth through his body. He had been standing squarely in front of his loop-hole; and one of the Comanches, left behind by the first rush, had stabbed him through the loop-hole with a shortened lance. Keller laid him under the table, where no one would

trample him, gave him some water and turned away to a loop-hole while Mrs. Jervey took Lorton's head in her lap.

The room was dank with powder-smoke; and the sharp, acrid fumes from the smoldering sacaton roof almost choked them. Their eyes watered and stung from the smoke, and from time to time an arrow rose from the corral, described its arc, broke into flame and sank with a dull thud into the roof.

Keller pulled Sauls into the middle of the room. "Watch that roof," he said. The minute you see flame, suck through the thatch, drag it down inside. We can't afford to waste water. Watch the corral, too."

THERE was no sign of life in the corral except for the stamp and whinny of a concealed pony, but Keller felt sure that some special devilment was being planned. That gatepost could only mean that they intended to use it as a ram to batter down the door. If that door went down, they were lost.

"There's only one thing to do," he muttered. "It's risky, but it must be done. Listen to me, Lieutenant." He drew Sauls aside and whispered, so that Margaret should not hear. "The sun is almost down. The minute night comes and we can't see, those devils will bring that gatepost from the corral and beat in the door. They daren't try it while we can see to shoot. There's only one way to stop 'em. Two of us must lie outside the house. If we do that, we can attack them in the darkness. As soon as dark comes, I'm going out on one angle of the house. Somebody else'll have to take the opposite corner. That'll leave two men to stay with the women."

"I'll take one corner of the house. You take the other," said Sauls quickly. But Keller shook his head.

"That'll never do, Lieutenant," he said. "Your business is to protect the women.

Besides that—excuse me, sir, for sayin' so—but you don't savvy the Comanches like Jones and I do."

He motioned to Jones, who slid over to him through the powder-smoke and listened while Keller explained. When Keller was through, Jones merely nodded, spun the cylinder of his revolver, re-capped every nipple and nodded comprehendingly.

Sauls argued furiously. Even then he could not command. That command had definitely passed from Sauls to Keller, though neither would admit it.

"It's this way, Lieutenant. Even a general can't order a man to throw his life away. He'd have to ask for volunteers. That's what you've done here an' now. An' Jones an' I have volunteered. That's all . . . Mind this though, sir. If this fails—if anything should happen that we can't foresee—don't let the women fall alive into Comanche hands. Mind that, sir. Wait till the very last minute and—keep the last shot for yourself."

Then with a sudden rush, the sun went down and the long shadows of mesquite and cottonwoods merged into the short gray twilight of the uplands. In that hour before full dark, a few stars pricked out against a velvet sky. Inside the house everything had to be done by touch. There were no candles, and Keller dared not light a fire. The tiniest flame would indicate a loop-hole. He finally drew Sauls aside.

"We're goin' now, sir," he said. "I'm takin' the northeast corner, Jones the southwest. When one of us is ready to come in, he'll whistle twice low. Don't open the door unless you're sure."

The door was opened cautiously and the two men edged out into the night. Then Jones slipped around the southwest corner. Keller, bending low, moved toward the corral.

He had a good mental picture of the terrain. A few yards from the house the

adobe oven stood like a huge blister. That was the very place an Indian would choose for cover.

"Right out in the open is the best place," he told himself.

Dropping flat on the ground he worked his pistol holster back from his right hip as he crawled across the flat. Those Indians would come in a straight line from the corral. They would head directly for the door, he knew, so he took a position squarely in the line between the corral gate and house door.

The few stunted mesquite bushes that dotted the open flat gave little cover. The sharp gravel cut his hands and knees like knives. It took him an hour to cover thirty yards, for he could move only an inch at a time, pausing to listen at each halt.

The night was full of sounds. Tiny night birds chirped from time to time and the shrill chatter of a gopher sounded loud. The sudden stamp of an Indian pony in the corral cracked out like thunder.

In the silence that followed, Keller seemed to hear his own thoughts. First among them was the thought of Margaret Bent, whom he had known as a child; whose father he had always admired with a sort of hero-worship. Margaret must be rescued from this red tragedy. But he could not see how it could be done. He was glad now that he had never mentioned that message that he had given Est to carry. The bitterness of death would have been too great to be endured if hope for aid had been held out.

Suddenly a little desert bird chirped almost in his ear—and his heart seemed to stand still. . . .

Two hours passed. Then to his waiting ears came a slow, heavy shuffle, the noise of moccasined feet over gravel, a thud, a grunt. He drew himself together like a coiled spring, ready to move in any direction, poised on both hands. As though he had seen it, he knew what had hap-

pened. The men carrying that log had dropped it. He strained his ears to listen.

The sibilant sounds of hurried breathing came to him. The Indians were within five yards of him . . . Suddenly, lying flat on the gravel, he saw six heads outlined in dim silhouette against the sky.

KELLER lifted his heavy pistol, holding back the trigger so that the hammer should give no betraying click when he cocked it. For one moment he crouched, then moved forward like a drifting shadow. Those six men bearing the log had no suspicion of any opposition out here. They were sure that the heavy-footed white men were immured in the house.

Within six feet of the log, Keller rose swiftly to his feet. He pressed his gun-muzzle into the ribs of the nearest man. He caught the fellow's sickening, sweetish body stench as he pulled the trigger. With a choking cry, the man dropped. Without pausing, Keller fired three more shots into the huddled darkness by the log. He kept that last shot for himself. But there was no need for it. Three were down—and the others broke for the corral as Keller ran back to the house.

He suddenly remembered that he must not run straight. Fleeing men betray themselves by running straight. He stumbled over a squirming body and dropped to his knees as a man clutched him by a leg. His groping fingers found the man's throat, and for a moment Indian and white man rolled over and over in a squirming mass.

Keller dared not use that last shot. His hand went to his belt, where a ten-inch knife lay flat against his thigh. The Comanche tried to shout, but Keller's left hand closed on his throat. Then his right hand shot up and forward and down, with a sudden slashing motion. A little hiss seemed to explode under the knife . . . Then Keller crept back into the dark-

ness and headed for the house. His work was done.

At his low whistle the door opened slowly, and Felton swore in the darkness.

"Who is it?" he asked. "You Lieutenant?"

Keller snatched at him. Had Felton lost his mind?

"Lieutenant?" he whispered shrilly. "What do you mean? Isn't the lieutenant here? Where the hell is he?" And he shook Felton as a dog shakes a boot.

From a babble of broken voices he picked one—Margaret's. She seized him by an arm, and her voice broke.

"Lieutenant Sauls went out," she said, "soon after you left. It must have been an hour ago. We—we heard voices out there. It—it sounded like a struggle. Once a man seemed trying to shout. Lieutenant Sauls ordered Felton to keep the door while he himself went out to see what it was."

Keller stood appalled. Of all men, Sauls was the least fitted to meet with what this night held. Yet he had gone out there alone, into the darkness, to the very face of a deadly foe.

Keller shook himself loose and laid a hand on the door. He heard his own voice, as though he were speaking from a distance.

"Watch this door carefully," he said to Felton. "This time when I come back, I'll scrape my foot along the sill. I daren't whistle again."

Then he was gone in the night and Felton closed the door.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death Makes a Hero

KELLER dropped to his belly and crept along the shadows. He had learned this work from old Kiowa Steve, the best scout along the border. Keller made sure his knife was loose in the

sheath. Cursing his heavy clumsy cavalry half-boots, he slipped them off, and wriggled on into the night.

The darkness smote Keller like a clenched fist as a sudden groan came to him. The low, tense groan was followed by a soft sibilant: "Hsh! Hsh!" It sounded like a snake rustling over dry leaves.

He wriggled slowly in the direction of the sound. He lay close to the ground and watched the skyline. Presently a smudge seemed to lift against the dim gray of the sky.

Keller dared not speak. The Comanches too might have heard that sound. He bit his lips till the salty taste of blood bade him beware. Then he stretched out a hand, and it touched something rough. He recognized it as cloth, white man's cloth. Then a flying cloud drew clear of the star-ruck, and a dim glow seemed to touch the brush with a faint sort of gilding, just a glow that told light from darkness. In that deceptive glow, he felt rather than saw four bodies.

His heart seemed to stop beating.

Then a hand went out again. This time he touched a shoulder and recognized what he gripped—the rough edges of a heavily embroidered shoulder-strap. It was Sauls.

Beneath Sauls, with both the lieutenant's hands firmly sunk in his neck, lay the naked body of a Comanche warrior. The unnatural twist to his head told that his neck had been broken. Keller's hands explored further. He tore open Sauls' shirt. The lieutenant's heart was beating; and his breath, as Keller laid face against his lips, came distinctly. With a muttered prayer that sounded like an oath, Keller crawled on. He rolled a lifeless naked body aside, and his seeking hands told him that the man underneath was Jones. A shortened lance driven through the body told how Jones had died. That meant that a man was already in hiding

in that place when Jones had got there. Jones hadn't had a chance.

"An' then this blunderin' fool of a lieutenant," thought Keller bitterly, "came out to find Jones . . . What good could he do? The damned fool!"

The 'Damned Fool' suddenly sat up. His hands sought his head as though he was violently sick. Then he saw Keller.

"Stabbed?" whispered Keller.

"No. I was struck with a war-axe, I think. It knocked me out, but I got my men. I broke one's neck. They had killed Jones and were tryin' to scalp him when I got here. . . ."

"Come on, sir. We'll try to make the house."

Michael Keller, his heart suddenly warmed to this officer who had never before seen a shot fired in war, passed an arm about him. But Sauls shook him off.

"You get back to the house at once, Corporal," he said grimly. "You belong there. Miss Bent and Mrs. Jervey must look to you. I am responsible for this mess . . . Get back, I say."

"With you, sir. Without you, I'll be damned if I go an inch."

"And leave one of my men to be mutilated by the enemy? By God, that's rank dishonor! I take him back, or I don't go."

It was mad, of course. Kiowa Steve would have said so. Michael Keller, knowing all there was to know about Indian fighting, felt so. He said much that is forbidden by the Army Regulations and the Articles of War. And Howard Sauls, on whose commission the ink was scarcely dry, essayed a feeble grin.

"If you feel that way about it, give a hand," he said. "I don't go an inch without him. A dog wouldn't leave a friend like this."

MICHAEL KELLER'S heart warmed suddenly. He had never thought he would hear Sauls apply that

word "friend" to an enlisted man. He detested every pound of Sauls' great body, but he was suddenly aware of a germ of respect that he almost resented.

Together they lifted Jones' body and carried it to the house, and Keller scraped a foot along the sill. The door opened silently, and Felton closed and barred it as carefully as he had opened it.

Michael Keller was suddenly aware of a greenish glow that heralded the dawn. A quick word from Felton drew him to the eastern side of the house.

"Here they come, Corporal! On three sides at once, too!"

Sauls and Felton, a carbine in each hand, dashed to their loopholes, and Keller handed Margaret a pistol.

"You'd better have this," he said dully. "Remember—if there is no one left to look after you, use this—but only as a last resort. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

Sauls' carbine cracked as a shrill yell told that the attack had opened in full force.

The three defenders passed at a run from loop-hole to loop-hole, firing as rapidly as they could load. The room filled with smoke. The sacaton roof, fired again by arrows from the corral, flamed freely and its smoke sucked inside the house in acrid billows.

Then came a dull thud, as the gatepost landed squarely on the door. Before they could quite realize what had happened, the heavy door burst from its hinges and was driven halfway across the room before the wild rush of a score of maddened warriors.

Felton was down on his back, pistol and knife taking toll for his life. Keller suddenly went down, with a lance-point in his shoulder as Sauls, carried back by the rush and almost swept off his feet, seized a rusty axe from the fireplace, leaped above the fallen Keller and swung his axe.

Keller strove to rise, but a warrior threw his weight on the lance and forced him back. Men tripped over each other, fell and scrambled to their feet again. Bowstaves and spears were thrust at the only white man on his feet—Sauls, fighting with a fierce, berserk rage.

Sauls must have known that all was lost, but he fought like a trapped wolf. His axe swung in a full circle, and he swayed with the weight of his blows. A man sprang forward, lance in hand, but a quick swing of the axe sent the steel lance head ringing to the floor. Then a lariat snaked out above the heads of the mob, the loop settled about Sauls' head, and two men dragged him to his knees.

His sweating hands slipped on the blood-wet axe-helve, and it shot across the room, the dull edge catching a man squarely on the chin. The lariat suddenly parted, and a stone-headed war-axe struck his head, glancing to his shoulder. As in a dream, Sauls saw Keller tear the lance from his wounded shoulder and drive it through a warrior's throat as a shrill yell broke from a man by the door. He clapped a hand across his mouth and set up a shrill keening, a yell of fright and unmitigated terror. Then he turned and ran.

The men suddenly shrank back from that shambles, like a row of poplars sucking against a gale of wind. Yells mingled with shouts of a very different tenor. Then came shots, the shrill screams of horses and a long, unmistakable yell. Sauls had never heard that yell, but Michael Keller knew it. Reeling from his wounds, bleeding from lance and arrow thrusts, Keller staggered to the door, held himself erect by bracing both hands on the door-posts, and stared out into the growing day.

Angels from heaven would have been no more welcome. Across that sun-drenched flat, roaring, bubbling and

squealing as they came, twenty huge shaggy camels rushed toward the house in a charge that could not be withstood. Just ordinary baggage camels, they were. Two thousand years earlier, Solomon had used their forebears to freight the gold of Ophir, and Hiram had used them to snake the cedar logs out of Lebanon for Solomon's temple. But now every one was a war-camel, long necks stretched grotesquely out to balance the ungainly bodies. Astride those clumsy mounts, their legs desperately clamoring the hairy sides, their frenzied hands working their red-hot pistols and carbines, the men of the Camel Company charged home.

THERE was no withstanding that charge. Keller, whose delayed message had brought them here, slumped to his knees. He was not aware of three horsemen following hard on the heels of the charge. He got to his feet in time to see two officers come forward and stop by him.

Sauls rolled clear of a little heap of warriors, staggered forward and snapped a hand up in formal salute. The officers stood astounded.

"Sir . . . Colonel . . ." Sauls' voice was very thick. "This is all my fault. I should not have come on in the face of what—"

He pitched forward on his face, and the tall colonel bent over him.

"See to him, Doctor," he said. "I fear he is badly hurt. Can you give me the details of this affair, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir." Corporal Michael Keller, who hated every bone in the body of Second Lieutenant Howard Sauls, got a firm grip on himself. "Sir, the lieutenant learned too late that the Comanches were out. We had got to Est's ranch before we learned. It was too late to turn back. The mules were all tired out, sir. We had to come on. This ranch seemed the best place in case of trouble. The lieutenant talked the matter over with me, sir. As

soon as he was convinced that the trail was dangerous, he sent word in to San Antonio for the Camel Company to follow his trail fast. He told me to tell that man Est to take the message, sir. . . . It was his message, Colonel, that. . . ."

"Sir . . . Colonel, that is a direct lie, sir!" Lieutenant Sauls staggered forward a step. "I alone am responsible for all that has occurred. My resignation will be in the hands of the adjutant as soon as I return to. . . ."

"Sir," said Corporal Michael Keller, "the colonel can see that the lieutenant is not quite responsible for what he says. He was out-lyin' last night. Killed two men, tryin' to bring his dead in unmutilated. He was hit on the head by a war axe."

Sauls would have fallen but for Kel-

ler's ready hand. He swayed a little on his feet, but his words were clear enough.

"I have one recommendation, sir," he said. "You will find that Corporal Keller here has been designated to take the examination for a commission. . . . He is qualified—except that he's an awful liar. . . ."

"I think," said Colonel Robert E. Lee gravely, "the Second Cavalry needs such liars."

Colonel Lee glanced at Mrs. Jervey, being helped to a seat by two men. He observed that the men of the Camel Company were taking account of stock. His eyes came back, not unwillingly, to Margaret Bent, who was standing very close to Corporal Michael Keller. And the kindly lines of his face crinkled into a smile.

THE END

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*They tried getting
money in the wrong
way. . . .*



**By
Stanley G.
Allen**

Traitor's Partner

By his low-tied guns, Dave Moncreath vowed he'd collect from his traitorous saddle mate for those tortured, empty prison years. . . . Then, at last, on a night of blood and powderflame, payment was his: In strange treaty with a man who would not die!

THE wind was an icy quirt on the grim, gray face of the man riding down Juniper Ridge—but he didn't feel it. Perhaps it was because blue-white flames of hate, fanned by brooding years, were ablaze in his heart. Yet, if any warmth reached the cobalt blue of Dave Moncreath's eyes fastened with anticipation on the ranch cupped in the valley below, it chilled and crystallized there.

Angling down the steep side hill, and keeping behind a growth of wind-whipped junipers, Moncreath headed for the buildings at Coyote Springs. Passing the corral he unbuttoned his threadbare coat. It didn't matter about the cold, but it would matter, mightily, how fast he could get to the gun slung at his hip. The jogging roan slowed to a walk, halted a few feet from the house.

There was a movement at the curtained window, the glint of an upraised rifle barrel. Dave Moncreath's wary eyes saw it. His gun whipped from its holster, but no fiery tongue stabbed from it.

Galvanized in his saddle, the man was gazing at a woman's face pressed against that window, a face that was all frightened gray eyes and a pretty mouth that quivered.

"Dave! Dave Moncreath!"

The wind-battered door was flung open and there stood Laurie, tall and straight and slim as she had been three years before. He saw the same bright hair, a resplendent mixture of red and gold, and the same proud grace. Whatever reaction Moncreath might have had, it did not show in his lean face.

"Is Ralph—your husband—in there?"

"No. But he'll be here soon, Dave. Won't you come in?"

Stiffly he slid from his saddle, walked to the doorway. His hand still close to his gun, he probed the interior of the room. His gaze shifted back to Laurie who was standing there trembling.

"You're cryin', he whispered hoarsely. "Why?"

"Because I might've killed one of the best friends that Ralph and I ever had. Don't you see—when I heard your horse, and grabbed up that rifle, I thought you were one of Chris Colthorpe's men. Yes, he's still hogging range, and now he's even threatening to run us and our little bunch of sheep away from Coyote Springs. And he will!" She dabbed at her eyes. "Isn't it customary for old friends to shake hands, Dave?"

"Friends? Yeah, I—I guess." A cold hand contacted a warm one. Blue eyes looked into gray.

"You've changed a lot in three years," the young woman said. "Is that Arizona sunshine all a myth? I though you'd come back looking like a Mexican caballero."

"Arizona?"

"Why, yes! That's where you've been, isn't it? That's where Ralph said you were headed for, when you two parted."

Dave Moncreath eyed her blankly. "Where is Ralph?"

"Up at the sheep wagon, just over the ridge there." She answered innocently, pointing through the south window. "We can't keep a herder any more. Colthorpe scares them all away. He wounded one of them. And now I'm afraid he'll shoot—" Her voice broke, trailed off in a shudder.

Dave Moncreath's eyes hardened as he looked at that ridge. Softly, he drew in his breath. "I guess I'll ride up and see your husband."

"You won't have to do that," she answered. And there was sudden joy in her gray eyes. "He'll be coming home now any moment—to supper. Gee! Won't he be surprised—and happy—to see his old partner!"

Dave moved back his unbuttoned coat. "Yes," he answered simply, and he could feel the warm press of his gun against his thigh.

FIVE minutes later Ralph Bushnell, a broad, brown-haired man with bright dark eyes, stepped through the door of the log house at Coyote Springs. Carelessly, he called, "Hey, Laurie. Whose roan horse is—"

Then the sheepman saw Dave Moncreath standing there by the fireplace—Dave Moncreath, whose blue gaze was burning through the semi-darkness of the room. Bushnell froze where he stood. His lips, parted as if to speak, came together. The fingers of his right hand twitched, moved toward his gun, then slowly away again.

Laurie Bushnell came hurrying from the kitchen where she was getting supper. She saw the two men standing there, their gaze clashing. Puzzlement grew in her face.

"Ralph!" she cried. "What on earth's the matter with you? Dave's no ghost. I knew you'd be surprised, but I didn't think you'd be paralyzed with—Oh!" She broke off suddenly, "The chops are burning!" And she hurried back toward the kitchen.

"You!" Ralph Bushnell said in a low, strained voice.

Dave nodded. "The end of a trail leadin' to your door. I hope you'll enjoy your supper settin' across the table from me and rememberin'—"

"Boys!" Laurie called. "It's ready. Hurry now. You can talk in here just as well."

It was a strange meal. Dave Moncreath cool, and with a sinister light in his blue eyes, hardly looked at Ralph Bushnell. Bushnell, his hands unsteady, his face strained and colorless, was clearly not himself. But Laurie was too busy chattering to notice.

She stopped suddenly when, for the first time she noticed the ugly scar cut deep into Dave's neck, above the collar of his flannel shirt.

"Dave! What did you do to yourself down in Arizona? Tangle with a barbed wire fence?"

He shot a swift glance across at Bushnell. "No," he replied, a grim smile twisting his lips. "I just got it in the neck a little."

"You're going to stay here with us, Dave," the young woman rushed on. "We've got the start of a fine layout here, but Ralph needs help. He needs a partner, maybe—Someone to help him fight range hog Colthorpe—"

"I met Colthorpe this morning," Bushnell cut in, without taking eyes from his plate. "He told me I'd sell the sheep and the range to him—at his price—or hell would be poppin' by nightfall."

"And you gave him your answer?" Laurie responded.

"I told him to raise his offer to a fair

price if he wanted to deal with me."

"But we're not bargaining with that scum at any price!" flared the wife. "We've got the start we always dreamed about—sheep, sheds and fences. We'll not be scared out of it. Maybe we'll go down fighting, but we won't run!"

Dave saw the leaping fires of defiance in her eyes, the set of her finely moulded mouth.

"I'm sure Ralph wouldn't run," he said cryptically, and he shot another glance across the table at the man who remained silent, occupied with food he seemed not to relish.

"All I pray is—that they don't shoot Ralph in the back," Laurie answered bitterly. "If that happened, all the world would go black for me. And Colthorpe, the crook! He's killed other men!"

"So I've heard," said Dave Moncreath dryly.

AFTER supper Bushnell started for the barn. Dave picked up his hat, moved toward the door as if to follow, but Laurie, red-gold hair glinting in the lamplight, touched his arm.

"What's the matter between you and Ralph? Supper tonight was like sitting on the bank of a frozen creek—a creek that's still smooth on top, but underneath it's all cross currents and treacherous whirlpools."

"Looks like Colthorpe's got under your husband's hide, that's all," he answered. "I'm goin' to talk to Ralph."

"Please do, Dave. Tell him you'll stay here with us; that the three of us can—"

He broke away from her then, and went out into the March night. The wind had gone down now, and ragged black clouds had left a clear sky. Bright stars were gleaming from one dark horizon to the other. In the haze of that starlight Dave moved toward the figure of Ralph Bushnell, outlined against the corral.

(Continued on page 106)



Out-Trail Caravan

THE punchers down by the corral watched him coming, marking with their eyes the points for attack. They couldn't miss the ancient cavalry saddle held together with stove wire. The kid's clothes were ragged. He wore a plowman's hobnailed boots, run over at the heels, and on one foot was a huge, rusted spur.

He came up, dragging the wilted brim of a battered sombrero a bit lower to hide the tell-tale thing that was in his eyes—the dogged look of defiance shadowed by discouragement that told better than words what he was—a range waif that no man would hire on for wages.

Nobody had warned him that Old Man Fallon, who was now sitting in his raw-hide chair out on the porch, was the toughest, ornierest old reprobate of a cowman in the Big Blue country. No puncher had told him that Silvertip Fallon's favorite sport was to take apart just such no-count drifters who showed up at the Diamond F. So, with the crew of grinning cowboys not wanting to miss the fun, the kid rode up and braced the boss for a job.

Then the fireworks started. But they were of a different kind entirely from what everyone expected. When things had quieted down some, the Lonesome Kid had himself a job—a real job on the toughest cowspread in the territory! And it was characteristic of the youngster that he wanted above everything else to make

a good hand for that outfit; that he'd die doing it, if necessary. That chance was not long in coming, either, because midnight guns were already taking bloody toll up in the high country. . . .

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The February issue is published De-

(Continued from page 104)

Hand close to the gun he had not removed even in the house, Dave closed the distance between them. Then he saw that Bushnell had discarded his gun.

"Where's the gun you had on?" he growled, facing him.

"Why?"

"You might need it. Or are you too damned yellow to use it if you had it?"

A nervous twitching commenced on Bushnell's face. His lips quirked down. "Spill what's on your chest. I guess this is the showdown."

"You're as right as you are yellow."

Dave's tone carried edge. "This is the end of a trail that began in Concho, a hell of a long ways from Coyote Springs. A pair of cowpunchers, that loved the same girl, got drunk one night and blowed some money that didn't belong to 'em. To keep it from their boss, they tried gettin' more money in the wrong way—and got the law on their trail.

"One of 'em had a fast horse, could've got away. But he hung back with his pal—and got a bullet through his neck. And what did the pal do? Why, he grabbed the three thousand loot, the fast horse, and run like a shot-at coyote. He made a long circle, came back, married the girl and started in the sheep business."

Bushnell shifted uneasily, made no attempt at denial.

"I guess you know the rest. They throwed me in jail when you got away," Dave went on, "and tried to make me tell who my pard was. But I didn't want him caught. Then I heard what he'd done. Since then, I've been wonderin' how he'd look, squirming on the ground with a bullet hole in his neck. And maybe one through his middle besides."

"No," Bushnell pleaded, his lips suddenly dry, his voice choking. "I'll turn these sheep, this ranch, over to you. Maybe the partnership Laurie mentioned—"

"Pards with you!" Dave's lip curled.

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"After the deal you handed me? Why, you damned, yellow, insultin' mongrel!" Without warning, he tossed his gun away. He waded in, both fists ready.

It didn't matter that Bushnell was the bigger, nor that his lashing fist ripped a gash in Dave's cheek. Dave's own right swing was crashing to Bushnell's face, a swing powered by long-harbored hate. His short left blasted into his opponent's stomach, and again that blasting right rocked Bushnell back against the corral poles. The sheepman went down, struggled groggily to rise.

A movement on the south horizon caught Dave's eye. Four riders were coming over the ridge. Starlight flashing on the steel of drawn guns. Dave reached down, jerked Bushnell to his feet.

"Look!" he ordered.

Bushnell blinked. "Chris Colthorpe. Another showdown!"

DAVE picked up his gun, a voice seeming to ring in his ears. It was Laurie's voice saying, "If anything happened to Ralph, all the world would go black for me. . . ."

Dave whirled on Bushnell. "Is this the way you meet a showdown? Or are you thinkin' of grabbin' a fast horse again, makin' your getaway?"

Bushnell rubbed his blow-numbered jaw, tried to say something; but Dave's voice, carrying the sting of a whiplash, cut in: "Go to the house. Tell Laurie to put that lamp out. Stay in there with her. Fight till you drop—or win. If you don't, I'll brand you with hot irons from head to foot."

"I'll fight," Bushnell answered. "Hell, I'd rather die than have you tell your story to Laurie, which you're spoilin' to do. If I'm killed, you can come in and crow over me with old Colthorpe!"

The big sheepster hurried toward the house, and in a moment the light in there

(Continued on page 108)

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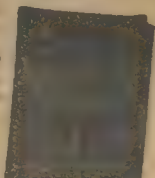
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ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 107)

went out. Dave moved slowly back into the darkness of the barn, his gaze riveted on four riders who had halted not far from the house. Evidently they, too, had seen that light go out. They were suspicious. Then they split, two of them circling around one side of the ranch house, the other two moving toward the barn.

A gun cracked. Dave saw a stab of fire licking the night. It came from a big hump-shouldered man who wore a flat-crowned hat and carried his head to one side. That was Chris Colthorpe, the man whose guns had murdered homesteaders, a human grizzly who blazed his trail of greed through life, as a fanged beast might slash and cuff its way through a band of sheep.

Other guns joined in, and the hills rocked with the concussion. Bullets whined into the log walls of the cabin which sheltered Laurie and her husband, and splintered glass clinked from window panes. Two guns in that cabin met the challenge of invaders, a rifle and a six-shooter, blasting lead at the two vaguely-seen attackers on the south.

Dave had made no move yet. He was watching another rider who had leaped from his saddle and was sneaking up to the corner of the house. A tin can flashed in the bright starlight, and Dave caught a whiff of kerosene.

A match flared. But before the rider could apply it to the kerosene-saturated bundle of dried willows he had planted against the log wall, Dave had pulled his trigger. With a cry of pain and surprise the man straightened, reeled toward his horse. Before he could grab the reins, Dave's gun was ripping another bullet into him, dropping him to the ground.

"The barn!" bellowed old Chris Colthorpe. "Git the skunk that's cached out there!"

Three riders rushed toward Dave's hideout, scattering quickly as they piled

from their horses and sought shelter. Then, determinedly, inexorably, they began pouring a barrage of lead into the old barn which was constructed of slabs, a building far more vulnerable to bullets than was the log house. Splinters flew. One jabbed into Dave's left arm, hung there like an arrow.

Dave jerked it clean, looked out at the rectangle of stars framed by the doorway—and saw only the red-gold hair of a girl named Laurie, a girl whose dreams were cradled between the two ridges of this little valley.

A crouched figure edged toward that doorway now. Stabs of flame leaped at Dave. Twice he pulled the trigger of his steady gun, and he knew that his bullets were tearing through that crouched figure with the flat-crowned hat.

Christ Colthorpe cursed, tried to whip up his sagging weapon, but it seemed too heavy for him. He swayed went down. But two more men were at the hay windows above the mangers—and at that instant Death's black wing brushed close to Dave Moncreath. He whirled to face those odds—knowing he was too late to save himself.

Then, from another direction, quick, sharp gunfire was blasting. And while his own gun was swinging about uselessly, Dave saw those two figures out there crumpling.

“DAVE!”

It was Laurie's voice, pitched to a scream. She and Ralph were running to the doorway.

“I'm all right,” Dave answered, the hint of a queer smile on his face. “And so is Christ Colthorpe, for once.”

Bushnell lighted a lantern hanging on a harness peg. Half the globe had been shot away and the flame sputtered, weaving ghostly patterns on the slab walls, shedding its sickly gleam on the sprawling

(Continued on page 110)

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ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 109)

form of Chris Colthorpe. Laurie shuddered, stepped between Dave and her husband, who were eyeing each other.

"Colthorpe!" she said. "He didn't know Ralph and I had a partner, Dave. We're proud of you. And I'm proud of my husband—the way he went after the two men who thought they were going to finish you off."

Seconds ticked by. The two men stood there, saying nothing. Then Ralph Bushnell spoke, slowly, leadenly.

"I'm afraid you don't understand, Laurie. "Dave don't want to be my pard any more. There's something he wants to tell you."

Dave Moncreath hesitated and familiar horizons with their landmarks of hate were suddenly topsy-turvy. This wasn't the same Ralph Bushnell who had once deserted a wounded saddlemate. This wasn't that Ralph Bushnell he had pounded with hard, hateful fists out there by the corral a few short minutes ago. Hell, a gent couldn't be bad who had fought the way he had seen Bushnell fight tonight. Something was wrong. . . .

Dave smiled, a smile that blotted out those grim years in "Arizona." He said, "It's just that I think Ralph should've bought a cow outfit, Laurie. But still, I guess there is money in sheep. And if you two think I could be of some help around here—"

"Why, you bull-headed old cowpuncher!" Laurie cried. "So that's what was griping you!"

And, chattering on as she led the way to the house, she didn't notice the two men behind her silently shaking hands.

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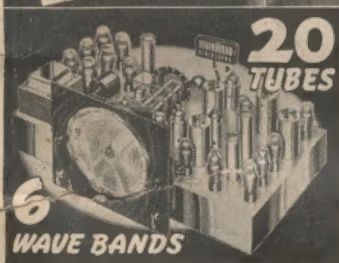
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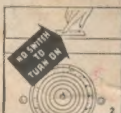
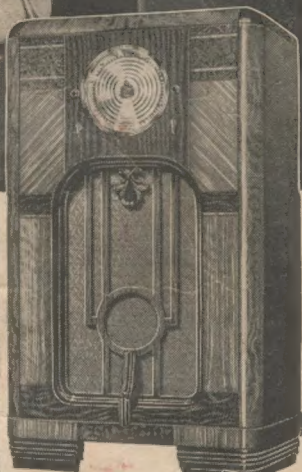
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